

To Exalt Christ

To Equip, Encourage, Exhort and Edify God's Elect

The Church Cautioned – 1 Corinthians 4:1-7

Paul's chief concern since the beginning of his letter is the unity of the church at Corinth. The main cause of concern to this point has been the quarrels between church members in regard to who they follow whether it be Paul, Apollos or Peter. Paul laid the theological foundation when he began the church and Peter and Apollos subsequently built on it. (3:6,10).

They built with good materials but Paul's concern in chapter 3 was with others who might not build with the same orthodoxy as they were so careful to do. Thus his concern for the unity and quality of the church and its members.

Jesus said in Matthew 12:25 – *“Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.”* The amount of parchment and ink that Paul spent on this letter is an indication of how serious this was to Paul. He cared about all the churches he had begun and it is why he spent parchment and ink to write them and wore out sandals to go and visit them.

He ended what we know as chapter three with a command in verse 21 – *“So then no more boasting about men!”* He pointed out that they had all they needed in every way, with the final statement that – *“you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”* It is those two concluding facts that sets everything and everybody else in their proper place and priority.

In the end it is our relationship with Christ through to God that really matters. All things, including Apollos and Peter and Paul should point to Christ and God and the Holy Spirit who lives in every believer, everyone

God has called to belong to Christ. So how are these three preachers then to be regarded and what is their function?

Servants and Secrets – 1 Corinthians 4:1

Paul stated in verse 1 – *“So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.”* Paul did not elevate himself or Peter or Apollos to some high ecclesiastical position or title but instead took on the subservient role of servant. It was a high calling to a lowly office.

Paul had previously said in 3:5-7– *“What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe. – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.”* It is that *“but God”* that makes the big difference.

Paul served them through his preaching and teaching and leadership. He also served them through his letter. We have noted before that Paul took the time and it would have been considerable time, to write a letter of this magnitude but also to put together its content in an organized, orderly manner.

His letters, plural, also followed a pattern of theology and doctrine to start with and then to follow that with practical application. With regard to the theology and doctrine they were the secrets that he along with Peter and Apollos unpacked and disclosed to the church.

So in regard to them being servants of the secrets, they had the same message, so it all boiled down to personality and presentation. It was said that Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758, an American Reformed preacher, used to read his entire sermon. He never looked at his congregation or made eye contact with them and yet people were moved to repentance and faith.

So it is not the messenger that is important, their personality or presentation, but the message which the Holy Spirit takes from the outside and implants on the inside.

Paul says that this threesome have been entrusted with the secret things of God. To be entrusted with something speaks to its value. For Paul there was only one thing that fit that category of extrinsic and intrinsic value – it was the gospel.

Later on in 1 Corinthians 9:16 Paul will write – *“Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.”*

What is it that has provided fuel, impetus, purpose for the last 21 centuries of preaching and teaching and writing and publication and mission work and martyrdom and choir practices? What is it? It is the gospel. Six letters that stand for good news that God the Father sent Christ the Son to be our salvation. Six letters that as an acronym mean –

God’s Only Son Provides Eternal Life.

Paul said he was compelled to preach the gospel which means he had no choice. He was like Jeremiah who wrote of his own experience with the word and will of God – *“So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”* (20:8b-9).

Jeremiah suffered for the sake of the word of God but God sustained him to do so. He was appointed by God to be a prophet just as Paul was appointed to be a preacher, a preacher of the gospel.

That is the effect the gospel had on Paul. He could not help but preach it. Woe to me, he said; grief to me, if I do not preach and propagate the gospel.

Paul therefore was not good at keeping secrets and the gospel was one secret that was not meant to be secret but instead be manifest, defined and declared. It was not meant to be hidden.

It is the gospel that clearly defines the Christian faith. The gospel is not only its core but is its entire substance. Take away the historic, factual reality of the cross and the empty tomb and what do you have? An empty shell. The gospel via the inner work of the Holy Spirit is as Paul told the church at Rome – *“I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous shall live by faith.”*

Think of all the forms of violence that pervades our society today. Think of all the wars and oppression that occur around the world. Recent ads state that one in four Canadian young people have considered suicide. One in two youth are struggling with mental issues. Drug related deaths, opioid overdoses – 6000 across Canada in 2023. What is the answer? Is it not in the not-so-secret things of God, namely the gospel?

The power to be saved both temporally and eternally is in the gospel. The power and ability to live righteously and reject the wisdom and ways of this world are in the gospel. Paul told the Corinthians then and he tells the Canadians now, *“You are still worldly...For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.”* People have abandoned the church because the church has abandoned the gospel. It has gone the way of the world and provides no viable, life-giving, life-saving alternative. If it has gone the way of the world, where does the world go? To whom or to what do people turn?

Paul knew the value of the gospel because by it he was saved. He knew that personally. It was not a commodity to be bought and sold. The price had already been paid in the blood of the Lamb of God. He who came take away our sin, our unrighteousness, our proclivity to sin and give us a faith to live by. It both comforts and convicts on a daily basis. It changes our life both now and forever. We can say no to what we used to say yes to. That gospel and that faith leads us to –

Faithfulness and Fidelity – 1 Corinthians 4:2-5

Faithfulness, commitment grows out of faith, what we believe to be true. Fidelity is a strict conformity to what is true. In verse 2 Paul stated – *“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”*

What trust have Paul and his two fellow preachers been given? The word, ‘trust’ in the Oxford Dictionary defines trust as – *“a firm belief in the reliability or truth or strength of a person or thing.”* Does that not cover the gospel?

The gospel is both a person and a thing. It is reliable, it is true, it is strong to save. It is a person because it is embodied first and foremost in the incarnate person of Jesus Christ. It is a thing because it exists as a doctrine, a thing to be taught and caught by the ears and the mind and the heart and the soul.

Paul and Peter and Apollos were faithful regarding what had been entrusted to them. Faithfulness to Christ is faithfulness to the gospel and the word of God on the whole. Faithfulness and fidelity set the standard, the plumbline for everything else these three would do as servants of the secret and of the Lord.

In verses 3-5 Paul is saying that faithfulness and fidelity, conformity to what is true by him and his two fellow preachers can come under the judgment, the scrutiny of the Corinthians. However, his conscience is clear he said, but that does not mean he should be exempt from judgment. Calvin points out that *“it is the part of a good pastor to submit both his doctrine and his life for examination to the judgement of the church.”*

In 1 Timothy 4:16 Paul told young Timothy – *“Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do you will save both yourself and your hearers.”* IOW live out what you preach and teach and it will have an affect, it will bring about salvation. But for Paul the

judgment that really counts is when the Lord comes and motives are exposed and *“each will receive his praise from God.”*

Application and Attainment – 1 Corinthians 4:6-7

Paul says in verse 6 – *Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and to Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.”* IOW Paul is not telling them anything he would not apply to himself or to Apollos and Peter as well.

IOW practice what you preach. Be faithful with the secret things, the gospel. Watch your doctrine, what you teach and preach; persevere in them. Do not lower your guard and in doing so lower the gospel. The salvation of yourself and others is at stake. Apply it to yourself so that your example shows through to others. As you imitate Christ, they will imitate you.

Application has its ramifications. The application goes hand in hand with attainment. We generally think of attainment in terms of physical things that we get. But the Oxford defines it quite narrowly and briefly as *“something acquired, especially a mental attainment.”* In verse 6 Paul wants the Corinthians to – *“Learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.”* So this is very much *“a mental attainment.”*

They are to learn, which is a mental exercise, from Paul, Peter and Apollos not to go beyond what is written. What Paul has written so far in his letter they would have learned either by reading and/or hearing.

So Paul is cautioning the Corinthian church to not add anything to what he has written so far and which will also apply to the remainder of the letter. To go beyond that is to add what could be inappropriate, inaccurate and possibly heretical.

In 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 Paul told young Timothy – *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

This passage from 2 Timothy takes on added meaning when we go to 2 Peter 3:16 where Peter is referring to Paul’s letters. Peter wrote to his readers – *“He [Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”* The other Scriptures! The added meaning is that Peter considers Paul’s writings to be Scripture.

Paul it is thought wrote 1 Corinthians in the spring of AD53,54 or 55. Peter wrote his second letter in AD64. So, by his own testimony Peter did read Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and others as well. Peter’s pronouncement and that of the Church Fathers in assembling the Canon of Scripture, have raised Paul’s letters and the whole of the NT to that of being *“God-breathed”*, God inspired, therefore holy, set apart as the word of God. Therefore, Paul’s warning, *“Do not go beyond what is written.”* preceded Revelation 22:18-19 about not adding or taking away from the word.

He concluded verse 6 by saying – *“Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.”* IOW to stay within the bounds of what is written and hence been taught verbally, they will treat the threesome equally the same way without any favoritism. That is important for unity in the church.

We will give Calvin the last word – *“The true foundation of Christian modesty is this – not to be self-complacent, [i.e., smug] as knowing that we are empty and void of everything good – that if God has implanted in us anything that is good, we are so much more the debtors to his grace.”* Amen 😊 **Soli Deo Gloria.**