

The Man, the Church, and the Ministry

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1 Corinthians 3:5-23 (NKJV) “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. ¹¹ For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. ¹⁶ Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. ¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their own craftiness”; ²⁰ and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.” ²¹ Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. ²³ And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.”

It seems that the western church has lost the humility that characterized believers in the early church. Although God expects us to give honor to whom honor is due, we have adopted a superstar model of ministry in our modern age. Too many ministers today are marketing themselves to the church. They carry flashy business cards printed with impressive titles that neither Jesus nor the disciples ever sought to promote. We have produced a culture in ministry today where ministers can hardly pass up an opportunity to market themselves or develop relationships with other “successful” ministries in order to gain greater platforms for ministry. Building relationships for kingdom advancement is one thing, but the marketing of one’s ministry for personal advancement is another thing. Conveniently those interested in personal advancement avoid smaller venues for ministry by requiring a large base fee. You get the idea that if something is not big, it is not kingdom or worthy of our time. So much for the woman at the well! The superstar model sets the minister and the church up for pride, competition, and partisanship.

Unfortunately believers in the church are partly to blame for this western ministry culture. Why? It is because we evaluate success in ministry by standards that are at odds with the Scriptures. Not even Jesus could meet our western standards for success! We demand charisma rather than character. We demand hype rather than holiness. We demand signs rather than a sermon. We demand prosperity rather than purity. We demand to be entertained rather than to be educated in the Word. To cap it off, we support the ministers who give us what we want! Thus we reward bad models of ministry while punishing faithful ministers who

resist the pressure to conform. Faithful ministers today are frustrated by the intense pressure to scratch the itching ears of carnal church members. What happened to the days when Christians hungered to hear the uncompromised word of God? Where are the Christians who fear God and expect ministers to fear God? Don't be surprised if some of the greatest heroes of the faith alive today are *not* on your favorite Christian stations!

Paul was concerned about unhealthy views of God's ministers that had created attitudes of partisanship in the church at Corinth. Paul asked a question, "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos?" Then Paul answered this question: "Ministers through whom you believed!" Paul affirmed that although he had led them to Christ, he was not their Savior. He was simply God's newspaper boy distributing the Good News of salvation. It was through God's grace and their faith that they were saved. When humility comes back to the church, the sins of pride and partisanship will not be able to stay!

What is the church? Paul uses both agricultural and construction imagery to describe the church. On an agricultural level the church is God's field. In this field the individual believers in the church are like plants in the garden. God commissions workers to go out and work in His field. Some of these workers, like Paul, plant the seed. Other workers, like Apollos, water the seed. However, those who sow and those who water are not in competition. After all, only God can cause the plants to grow. They both rejoice in the fruitful results of their cooperative efforts. They know that they do not own the field nor do they own the harvest that comes from the field. The field, the plants, and the harvest all belong to the Owner who hired them. In the same way, each minister in God's church will receive a reward according to his own labor. No minister should ever believe or act as if the church, the members, or the fruit of the church are their own! In addition, members of the church should never believe or act as if the minister is the owner of the church or their source of identity.

Paul also uses construction imagery to describe the church. The church is God's building. The building that is being constructed is God's temple. Jesus Christ is the foundation of this temple. If the foundation is not Jesus, then it is not God's temple. Jesus is the Owner of the church. He is also the General Contractor over the building project (Matthew 16:18). Paul likens God's ministers to the skilled labor force hired by the General Contractor to do the work. In today's construction, these workers would include those such as concrete workers, framers, plumbers, electricians, sheet rockers, painters, brick layers, etc. Every minister has his own individual gift, responsibility, and importance in the construction process. The house can only be completed when each worker is faithful to do his part. Continuing with this imagery, Paul, as an apostle, laid the foundation of the church at Corinth. Teachers like Apollos came along later and built upon that foundation. However, both Paul and Apollos can rejoice together. Each individual believer in the church represents God's building materials of gold, silver, and precious stones. The builder must not substitute the character of gold, silver, and precious stone materials with the lesser carnal qualities of wood, hay, and stubble. The goal of the workers is to take the highest quality materials that God provides and build them into one church according to God's plan. Each worker will receive his own reward according to his own labor. Once each worker's task is completed, it will be tested by fire to prove its quality. If his work is burned up, the worker's labor will be considered faulty, and thus, in vain. The worker will still be saved but will receive no reward.

In conclusion, Paul admonishes the Corinthian believers to not boast in men. Christ alone is the Owner and Savior of the church. Each worker is simply God's minister. As such, each one will be held accountable to God for their work. Everything God has belongs to us regardless of the worker God chooses to transport them to us. For example, everything in God's wheelbarrow belongs to you and I regardless of who God hires to push the wheelbarrow! Paul admonishes the Corinthian believers to remember that they belong to Christ rather than to the minister. Each believer has a value and a purpose. As plants in God's

field we are to produce fruit unto God. As materials in God's building, we should strive to be gold, silver and precious stone. As God's church, we are to be a holy temple to the Lord. This is God's plan for the man, the church, and the ministry.