

Commentary

1-7 **Pastors are servants / stewards**

There are clear connections back into the wider context: how better to continue to 'demote' those leaders the Corinthians were exalting than by using this title 'subordinate' or 'underling'? At the same time, though Paul has been saying 'if anything, leaders belong to you (3:21-23)' that doesn't mean they're answerable to you. There is a Day set when they will give an answer to the One whose servant they truly are.

'Mysteries' in the NT are 'revealed secrets' (- it doesn't have anything to do with being mysterious): it's the revealed salvation-for-all-peoples-through-Christ plan of God (cf Ephesians 3:1-6). Pastors have been entrusted with the gospel, and all their ministry is about it.

The key question for a pastor is 'are you trustworthy with what has been entrusted to you?', and that trustworthiness is expressed by passing it on. In practise then, pastors steward by teaching (that's why, of the ten conditions of eligibility for pastors in 1 Tim 3, the only one 'professional' qualification is 'a good teacher'). That question about faithfulness in teaching (rather than being an inventor or embellisher) is to be answered before the judgement seat of Christ.

Paul applies this to his own attitude to Apollos: he has deliberately avoided judging him. Of course we should critique the teachers we hear (cf 1 Tim 5:19-20). But in Corinth, there was a judgmentalism prompted by pride (cf 7): Christians were writing off certain leaders simply because they preferred to follow some other leader as a guru.

Pastors are answerable to Christ, so there's a clear challenge here. Of course, the wise pastor will also listen to human criticism. But since God is always watching, and to him we'll give an account, the pastor won't use his unsupervised, unseen time as an opportunity to slack. But 5c is surprise ... it's not 'rebuke' but 'praise' that awaits the faithful steward, so we should be encouraged and motivated to keep going.

8-13 **Pastors are scum**

There are three metaphors here. In the amphitheatre, at the grand finale of a day's entertainment, criminals would be thrown to lions or forced to fight gladiators: we are like that (9). In a kitchen, we are like sweepings from the floor or scrapings from a dirty pot (13). Thirdly, when a Greek city is struck by plague, some poor souls would be thrown into the sea to appease the gods: we're like that 'scum'.

The apostles' experience is like these things because they are experiencing the sufferings listed in 11-13a. Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church. Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor hanged in 1945 in a concentration camp wrote: 'discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it's therefore

not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer'.

Some Christians do continue to suffer like this, but this is not our experience most of the time. 'Woe to you when all men speak well of you' (Luke 6:26): 'Beware the temptation to be a popular preacher! I doubt it is possible to be popular and faithful at the same time ... If we compromised less, we would undoubtedly suffer more' (Stott).

Paul says this to contrast with the smug security and self-satisfaction of the Corinthians. With biting sarcasm, Paul points out the way that they over-emphasise the 'already' of the Christian life at the expense of the 'not yet'. These highly blessed Corinthians are already in the Kingdom of God, enjoying its banquets, its treasures and its thrones: they've got a private millennium of their own. For the NT, the pattern is 'glory then' but 'suffering now' (cf Rom 8:18; 1 Peter 4:12-13).

14-21 **Pastors are fathers**

It may seem a contradiction of Matt 23:9 to hear Paul describing himself as their only father. But Jesus' warning was about adopting the dependent relationship of child to parent: instead, his disciples are to grow up into healthy independence and interdependence. Paul's point here is about something else ... his motive: he loves them as a father (just as he loves the Thessalonians as a mother cf 1 Thes 2:7).

This point is made clearer in the contrast with their other 'guides' (15) where Paul uses the word 'pedagogue', a live-in slave supervising a child's upbringing, often as a disciplinarian. A slave's motive was always obedience to his masters' instruction, not love for the child.

What does this father want? The logic of the 'therefore' at the start of 16 may be lost on us: but in the ancient world, a son did imitate his father (following into his career etc). Paul too wants the Corinthians to imitate him in his passion to live in the light of the cross ... adopting his values, his disdain of worldly pomp, his priorities, etc. It's further interesting that Timothy will remind the Corinthians of the consistency of Paul's example: Paul's 'ways' correspond to his 'teaching', and how pertinent in Corinth where they're not living up to what they know.

Having said that the 'love'-motive lies behind this image of father, love does not mean being soft. Discipline is loving (cf Hebrews 12:7-8) whereas it is unloving to be indifferent to wrong behaviour. It may be necessary to do 1 Cor 5:4-5. That's why Paul is quite prepared to come even 'with a rod' if necessary.

So what is Paul really looking for? He is interested not in their 'word' but what 'power' they have. This vocabulary is so clearly reminiscent of 1:17-18, 2:4-5 etc, that 'power' here must refer to the gospel. So Paul's question to them is this: are you lot empty, religious windbags, or are there people in Corinth whose lives have been transformed by the powerful gospel of Christ crucified? That is 'the demonstration of the Spirit' that mattered in his own ministry (2:4-5), just as in theirs.

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

Study Outline

Launching question

How are vicars viewed by 'the man on the street'?

Suggest words to describe what it should be like to be a church pastor.

The story so far ...

Why does Paul think the Corinthian 'divisions' (cf 3:4) are so wrong?

Pastors are servants / stewards

READ 4:1-7

What word(s) here describe a church pastor?

What is the main thing Paul is teaching by describing a pastor like this?

What is pastor's job?

How is a pastor's trustworthiness (cf 2) to be measured?

What judging is Paul telling us to avoid?

Should we critique leaders? How?

How is the teaching about the Day an encouragement/challenge to pastors?

How does Paul want these verses to change the Corinthian Christians?

Pastors are scum

READ 4:8-13

What is the contrast between 'you' and 'us'?

Who is the 'you', and who is the 'us'?

What are the Corinthians claiming?

What is Paul's experience, and his view of the Christian (minister's) life?

Does it matter that (generally speaking) our experience isn't like Paul's?

Why is Paul saying this to the Corinthians?

How does Paul want these verses to change the Corinthian Christians?

Pastors are fathers

READ 4:14-21

Paul is describing himself as their 'father': why?

How is a father different from other 'guides'? *fill in background from notes*

Does talk of 'a rod' (21) sound like a father's love?

What does Paul want them to do?

Look back to 1:17-18. What is the contrast in 4:19-20?

What does Paul want to find when he visits?

How does Paul want these verses to change the Corinthian Christians?

Thinking it through

How do these words describing a church pastor challenge our expectations?

How might these verses change how pastors think about their own role?

Paul is writing this not to pastors but to the whole congregation: how might these verses affect us?

People have always looked down on pastors ... what should our reaction be?

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

Study 6

Summary

Corinth was New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas all rolled into one. It was the Roman Empire's second city, and a centre for commerce, popular culture, mishmash-religion and pleasure. Paul's trip there in Acts 18:1-17 grew a church in the midst of hostility and inter-community tension. Within 2-3 years, Paul writes this letter responding to news brought by Chloe (1:11) and to issues raised in a letter they'd written to him (7:1).

In ch 1-4, as Paul confronts divisions in the church, look out for themes of ...

- worldly ways of thinking (eg exalting individual leaders, or their polished public speaking, stressing form over content);
- over-realised eschatology (ie bringing into the present some of the blessings God promises us for heaven), producing a triumphalism where individuals have an inflated view of their own maturity;
- what is authentic Christian ministry (and defending Paul's own ministry).

Ch 1-4 is really a pastoral sermon on the theme of **true wisdom and false**.

The story so far ...

Paul has heard from 'Chloe's people' (1:11) that the Corinthian church is quarrelling. He sees their dividing behind personalities (1:12) as evidence of a worldly immaturity. The gospel (1:18-25), the church (1:26-31) and the preacher (2:1-5) are counter-cultural: the world may sneer at the unimpressiveness of all three, but God's wisdom destroys human wisdom, status, social approval and rhetoric. Horrified by their 'personality cultism', he's been asking the question 'what on earth do you think we pastors are?' (cf 3:5). That's the question that 1 Corinthians 4 will answer.

Theme Sentence

Paul describes what a true pastor is like in answer to Corinthian divisions.

Ideas for application

- the first obvious application is to all Christian pastors/ministers, or to any kind of Christian leader: do these pictures describe me?
- but Paul isn't writing to pastors, but to a church congregation to ensure they treat their pastors right, with a right understanding of their job, their current experience and their motive. So do we? How can we support them, pray for them, encourage them? How do we need to change our attitude?