

# Leadership Through a Gospel Lens (1 Corinthians 3:1-4:21)

**Big Idea:** Don't build the church on personalities or leaders. Build the church on Jesus.

I see it all the time.

We see a new leader, and we think that our problems are solved. Of course, we know better, but there's an infatuation with a new leader, leading eventually to some disillusionment. But in the early days, we think that getting the right leader is a really big deal, that it will change everything.

If only we could agree on what a good leader is. Right now I see two big ideas about what a leader looks like:

One is a business kind of leader who sets vision and goals and make things happen, turning an organization – including a church – around.

The other is an artistic kind of leader who's creative and exudes energy and projects the right vibe.

We think that if we get the right leader that we're all set.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm all for good leadership. But according to today's passage, when we pin our hopes on a leader, we're actually endangering the church. We're seeing things through a worldly lens, and it will inevitably lead to problems.

## **Leadership Through a Worldly Lens**

You may ask, "What problem?" You only have to look at the passage we just read to find out.

We're looking right now at 1 Corinthians. In the Corinthian church, people began to get different ideas of what a good leader is, and the church began to split over their ideas. The church was divided, all because different groups had different expectations of what a good pastor looks like.

Look with me at the first few verses of chapter 3:

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

Notice what was going on in Corinth. They had different ideas of what a good leader looks like. They imported the world's idea of what a good leader looks like into the church. Everybody had their preferences.

Paul says that this is immature. In other words, you may expect that among new Christians. You may expect that new Christians aren't completely clear about what leadership looks like in the church. They should have known better, and their immaturity was causing division, jealousy, and strife within the church.

It is so easy to do this. I see it all the time. Pastors want to be a big deal. And people import the world's ideas of what a good leader is into the church and churches divide over it. I've experienced it firsthand. I'm listening to a podcast right now about the same thing. It's the easiest thing in the world to happen. And it's deadly.

You've heard the saying that everything rises and falls on leadership? That's going too far. Leadership is important, but we need to be careful not to look through a worldly lens. **When we're not clear on what a good pastor looks like, we'll start to import categories from the world, and the result will be disease and division in the church.**

This is a live issue within our church and every church. We have to pay attention. We can't look at leadership through a worldly lens because it will kill us. We must look at leadership through a gospel lens.

# Leadership Through a Gospel Lens

Okay. So verses 1 to 4 warn us against using a worldly lens for what good leadership looks like, and he wants us to replace it with a gospel lens. What does leadership look like through a gospel lens?

Paul gives us three images, with each image telling us something important that we need for this church.

## **Like farm workers, pastors are have important work to do, but are basically nobodies.**

During the pandemic, we had a bit of a crisis. COVID messed with getting enough migrant farm workers to come to Ontario. We needed them. They're important. Farms cannot survive without them.

But at the same time, there is no such thing as a celebrity farm worker. Nobody lines up to get a farm worker's autograph. They have important work to do, but they're nobodies, just like pastors.

Read the image in 3:5-9:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each

will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers.  
You are God's field, God's building.

Christian work is like farm work. You have important work to do, and so do I. But never forget: we are nobodies. No worker is more important than another worker. We're just farm workers.

Not only that, but Paul points out that farm workers work but they can't really make plants grow. A farm worker can never dance around a plant and say, "I did that!" They didn't. No farm worker can make anything grow. They can plant and water, but they can't produce life. Nobody who serves God can claim to have made people grow. We can do the work, but it's God who gives the growth.

In the end, the worker doesn't own the farm. It's all God's. No individual leader stands out. Like farm workers, pastors are just laborers.

Do you see what this means? There is no room for a pastor to get stuck on himself. Here's how you know you've found a pastor who understands this: they know they are not a big deal. A good pastor will not hog the spotlight. A good pastor will not build things around himself and his leadership. A good pastor will get out of the way and keep the focus on Jesus. A pastor is just a farm laborer. It's hard to think you're a big deal when you know you're just a farm worker.

Here's how you know a church gets this image: when the church isn't built around a pastor's personality. The pastor is not the point. The pastor is just a worker. The main attraction is Jesus. The center of what we're doing here is opening up the Bible with a desire to see Jesus. Who really cares who gets to do that, or who gets to serve the

people Jesus died for? It's all about Jesus. Everything else – including who the pastor happens to be – is secondary. It's never built around him.

Here's the second image.

## **Like builders, pastors are must build to the right standard.**

I like this image. My mother recently bought a brand new house. When they took possession, they conducted an inspection. They went through the entire house and looked carefully at how the house was built to make sure that everything was done properly. Of course, they found problems, so they reported them and were fixed. Builders build knowing that when their work is done, an inspection will take place.

Read what Paul writes:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw– each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is

burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

Here's what Paul is saying. He's a builder. The church is like a building. The most important thing is to get the foundation laid right, because you can't do that over again. The only proper foundation for the church is Jesus. The church must be built on him.

And what we build on that foundation must be consistent with the foundation, because an inspection is coming. God will reward his servants who build with the right materials, but he will not commend those who build with the wrong ones.

Friends, what are we building here? If we do not build on Jesus, we've missed the point. If we try to build the church on personality or gimmicks, we'll never pass inspection day. We've got to build to the right standard with the right materials.

Inspection day is coming. Can you imagine the day when God himself inspects our church to see what we've built? Think about that! Picture God shining the spotlight on all of our activities, all of our ministries, all of our motives, to see what we've produced here. Inspection day is coming, and what God thinks about what we're doing here is the only thing that matters.

Like farm workers, pastors have important work to do, but are basically nobodies. Like builders, pastors must build to the right standard.

Final image.

## **Like stewards, pastors manage God's business, not their own, and must answer to him.**

I need to explain this last image.

In Paul's day they had estate managers, high level stewards who managed the property in the owner's absence. They had a lot of responsibility, but they owned nothing. They had to give an accounting of how they managed the estate while the owner was away. He was responsible to God alone.

Paul writes:

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. (1 Corinthians 4:1-4)

We could make a lot of applications from this image. We don't own this. This is not our church. This belongs to God. We don't get to decide what to do with it. We are simply managing this church on God's behalf. It belongs to him, and he gets to decide what to do.

But the biggest application that Paul makes is that a steward answers to the owner alone. Who are we accountable to? God owns this church, and we must answer to

him. We can't decide what we want this church to be. We need to ask the owner what *he* wants the church to be.

Pastors are nobodies. Pastors must build with the right material. Pastors are accountable. Pastors manage God's business, not their own, and must answer to him.

When you boil it all down, here's what this passage today is telling us: **Don't build the church on personalities or leaders. Build the church on Jesus.**

I began by talking about how pastors are tempted to build churches around them, and it seems like plenty of churches are willing to go with that too. That's a very worldly way to manage an enterprise.

But we have the privilege of being something different. We have the privilege of being all about one thing and one thing only: Jesus.

We have to make sure our church is built on the right thing. I find that very exciting. We all have a role to play. It's an important role. But the biggest thing we all can do is to step out of the way and make this church about Jesus, not our preferences and not about personalities.

Will you help me do this?

Lord, this is our prayer. Make this church about Jesus and Jesus only. And help us to see leadership not through a worldly lens but a gospel lens. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.