

Title: A God-Driven Ministry

Text: 1 Corinthians 3.5-9

Theme: The church and its leaders

Series: 1 Corinthians #12

Prop Stmt. Appreciation your leaders, but do not worship them.

Read Text:

If you were paying the least bit of attention to what we just read there were some words that were repeated in order to make certain that we really understood the big idea. For one, Lord or God is mentioned 5 times. Planted and watered are mentioned 3 times. Task, labor, and workers factor into the picture. And people, Apollos, Paul, and the church are in the mix as well. This passage deals with the relationship between a church and its leaders. The relationship between a church and its leaders, like so many other things, can swing like a pendulum. We can look at churches that idolize its leaders and put them up on such a high pedestal that not only do the people in the church place more importance on them than they should, but the leader can like that, and get used to that and begin to think that not only do I like this, but I deserve this. On the other hand, a church can treat its leader(s) like a doormat and abuse them and wipe their feet on them. This passage presents such a balance. It saves us from too high of a view of the leaders in church, that is from thinking that the Leader is the person who makes the Church and it saves us from too low of a view of the leaders. They are not just servants, they are God's agents.¹ This issue is what occupies 3.5-19. I am preaching three sermons from these verses because Paul uses three analogies; the analogy of a field, the analogy of a building and the analogy of a shrine (or temple). This morning I am preaching on a God-driven ministry, then next Sunday – Jesus-driven ministry, and then Spirit-driven ministry.

As a leader in this church it is a rather awkward thing for me to address this topic. I doubt that on my own, I would just pick this topic since I generally do not like being perceived as one who uses the church for my own advancement. It is for the same reason that I do not relish preaching on giving. However, one of the advantages of preaching through a book the way the Holy Spirit had it written is that it forces me to provide you with a balanced diet. So, uncomfortable or not, here we are. When the NT deals with the issue of leadership in the church, there are some passages which make it clear that the leaders are not in a special class who are separate from and beyond the touch of the common person. In other words, leaders are cut out of the same bolt of cloth as you are. In other passages, the NT talks about the different functions that leaders have and how that is to be viewed and handled by the church. This is one of those passages. Let's dig in, remembering that the setting of these verses takes place in the middle of Paul's attempt to deal with the jealousy, arguing, and severe cliquishness that had arisen in the church. Paul asks a simple but penetrating question. "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? After all, who are these guys? Are they really as great as some of you are making them out to be?"

¹ This phrase is a re-wording of a statement that Rupert Davies made in his *Studies in 1 Corinthians* (London: Epworth Press, 1962), 41-48 and is cited in Thistleton's wonderful commentary on 1 Corinthians.

1. In the Church, Leaders are Servants – 5

This problem has plagued the church for 2,000 years. We look for people to follow and find it easy to ascribe to them more than we should. We want to find the perfect leader. We want to find the perfect pastor. We want to find the perfect church. Now, God uses leaders in His church to minister the Word to us. We profit from it, and learn from it, and are benefited from it. It is easy to think, since this guy was right about this and it helped me, then... he must be right about everything. So, we align ourselves up with him. If he says it, we say it. If he believes it, we believe it. If he does it, we think we ought to do it. If he disagrees with someone, we think we have to disagree with that someone too. We look for opportunities to align ourselves with that person, and to be associated with them. Why? Why do we do that? Is it because we secretly hope that the esteem that we have for that person will be like the esteem that other people have for us if we either associate ourselves with that person or try to be like that person? Or, is it because we want to find a person who does all of the mental heavy lifting, so we do not have to think on our own, but we can short cut the process and just do those things and get the same results? I do not know the answer to that question. But this much is clear. Whenever the church has created functional cults around personalities it has been very unhealthy for the church. It may have looked good during that generation, but time reveals the object of trust was in the wrong person.

A. Leaders Serve God.

In Romans 12 we read that we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. Here, Paul is cautioning us not to think of our leaders more highly than we ought. And what is so refreshing is that he is one of the leaders. Some of the people in Corinth were rightfully appreciative of the fact that God has used the ministry of Paul in their lives. But Paul is very quick to point out that his ministry (and Apollos or whoever else's ministry) benefited them because the leaders were in reality serving God. That is what a true leader is supposed to do. He is supposed to serve God. He is a servant, a waiter who while he serves people, is ultimately serving God and answers to Him. That may or may not be what you think is a benefit to you. Are you with me?

What if your father is in the hospital and you ask me to visit him and I do and God uses that visit to bring your father to Christ and that restores your relationship with your father. Does that benefit you? Sure! You may even think, "I like Bob, he sure makes life better for me." But, a couple of weeks later I observe that your children do not respect you and they are wild and out of control and I privately ask you about this now what happens? What happens depends on who you think I am serving. If you think that my ultimate job is to benefit you, you may become very defensive and very angry with me. If you think my job is to serve God by helping you deal with a blind spot in your life, then you may receive my probing with a thoughtful re-evaluation of your parenting.

B. God uses Leaders.

Verse 5 talks about how God used leaders as a means by which to bring some of the people to faith in Christ. They were the channel of the gospel, not the source of the gospel. They were the mailmen, not the letter-writers. Ultimately it was the Lord who assigned them to this task. What this means is that you should appreciate your leaders, but understand what they are. They are servants not icons. They are God's agents, not man's puppets. They are not too high, but neither are they to be dishonored.

2. In the Church, God is the Hero – 6-7

It is pretty clear from this text, that no one person can do it all, can they? Some people do a better job at planting. Some do a better job at watering. It is not only myopic, it is idiotic to treat one person as the one who does it all and who can do it all. Paul's planting would have been useless without Apollos' watering. If Paul had not planted, Apollos would not have had anything to water. But, of course neither would have been fruitful if God had not made it grow. It is extremely arrogant to present yourself as the one who can do it all. It is also wrong to think of one person who can do it all. I need the church just like you do. I do not have all of the spiritual gifts. I do not have all of the smarts that some people have, nor all of the abilities that others have. It would be deceitful for a leader to pretend to be something that he is not. It is also unwise for a church to pretend that their leader(s) is something that he is not.

We tend to have a distorted view of leadership. It used to be John Wayne, then Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson, then Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tom Cruise. The script is basically the same. The hero is a lone ranger who does not need anybody and acts alone. He is a mystery, a puzzle, a rugged individual who can do it all by himself. And when he is done, he leaves. That's power, that's influence...the ability to do whatever you want so that you do not have depend on anybody else. We want the freedom to be left alone and we now we have the curse of being alone. I think that we are the most wealthy and lonely nation on the earth. Our garages are full and our souls are empty. Cornerstone, this is our Corinth, this is our world. Our world thinks that we can do it all by ourselves. It is one of the reasons why people resist joining and committing. Robert Putnam wrote a book called "Bowling Alone" in which he points out that while more people than ever are bowling, fewer are bowling in leagues. We want better education, but no one wants to help the PTA. I think its part of the idol of American individualism run amok. Just as you cannot grow spiritually by yourself, and you have to have a church, at the same time, no leader in the church can do it all by himself.

Verse 6 makes a very strong point. If God did not make it grow, then planting and watering would be a waste of time, materials and energy. If God did not make it grow, it would not grow! Ultimately God makes it grow, but God uses people who plant and people who water. God uses different people for different jobs and the people are not the heroes – God is!

It really is amazing to see how much the church can accomplish if we don't worry so much about who gets the credit. After all, God is the hero. Several years ago a young

man started attending this church. He came to faith in Christ, and began to grow. But, he was never baptized, never joined the church, and never really served to the God-given capacity he had. I challenged him, answered his questions about baptism, but was unable to get him to move on that issue. He and his family lived on the west-side and eventually the drive was not practical and they found a great church near their home. He had not been there very long, when he was baptized, joined the church and is now teaching junior high students and they love him and he loves it. God used someone else to help move him in a way that I couldn't or didn't. The issue is not – why didn't he do that when he was here and in my church? The issue is – someone got off the bench and into the game!

Appreciate your leaders, but understand what they are not.

3. **In the Church, God Rules** – 8-9

A. Leaders Work on Purpose.

What is the purpose that Paul is talking about here? The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose. The purpose is – doing what God has called them to do. It is actually rather simple. But, not only are there leaders who “lord it over” their people, but there are people who actually like it that way. When you have a leader who lords his position over you, you do not have to think, you do not have to grow, you do not have to wrestle with issues on your own and learn to apply the Scriptures to your own life, you only have to follow what you are told to do. That may work in the army, but that is not how God designed the church to function. Leaders have to work on purpose and they must learn to do it in partnership.

B. Leaders Work in Partnership.

The leaders in this church are a team, and have to be a team. I would like for the members of the pastoral staff and elders to stand. I would like our Women's Ministries Director – Denise to stand. Please remain standing. I want to publicly acknowledge the privilege that I have of serving alongside of some of the choicest servants of God that I have ever met. We really function as a team and we have different roles and we trust each other and cover each other. But, do you know why there is such a partnership? In part it is because you as a congregation do not set us on a level that is too high nor, do you demean your leaders.

I would like for the Finance Team and Mission's Team to stand. Please remain standing. Why do we have these teams? Because no one group can do it all neither should they try. We have to stay on top of communication and ideas. But the finance team does not rule the church, the mission's team does not rule the church, the elders and staff ultimately does not rule – God does. We have established a structure and spirit of leadership that is a reflection of this and the other passages that deal with leadership in the church.

Appreciate your leaders, but understand their role.

Appreciate your leaders, but understand what they are – servants.

Appreciate your leaders, but understand what they are not – heroes.
Appreciate your leaders, but understand their role – they are teammates.

Conclusion:

The entire book of 1 Corinthians is teaching us how to be and do church in the middle of a very sinful world. The church at Corinth was uptight and tense. It was full of problems. Have you ever been in a situation that was uptight and tense? I have been in those circumstances. My own personal observation is that they are caused by one of two things. Either there is an unresolved problem that no one is addressing or people are under pressure to perform beyond what they fear they are capable of. This passage is like a valve that releases a lot of that pressure. It teaches you that I am not your hero – Jesus is. If you expect me or other leaders to be perfect, we are going to disappoint you. If you expect me to do it all, I can't. I can't study 40 hours a week, counsel 40 hours a week, administer the church 40 hours a week, visit the hospitals every day and be a good husband, father and son. Do not expect me or any leader to do it all. We do not want to do that. Not only can we not do that, but if we try to make it appear that we can, we are being hypocritical and we are setting for you a terrible example. Because, like it or not, leaders lead by example. I do not help you if I make you think that you have to be able to do everything perfectly. I help you if by my life, words and attitude I set an example of authentic living under the grace of God. We will seek to minister to you as we should before God. But, we can all relax a little bit. This passage teaches me, that I should not try to be your hero. I can acknowledge my weaknesses, blind spots and personal limitations. That means that I can learn from you and I should. It means that you can follow me, as long as we both know that we are following Christ, and that He rules because He really is the Hero.

Parent announcement: When you pick up your kids – Pastor Fred will be briefly introducing KidsQuest - our summer outreach Mid-Week ministry which begins Wed.