

UNITED to follow God's leaders

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

MPS: Pastors are God's servants given to His church to lead people in following Jesus.

OBJ: Every person can understand and rightly regard the pastoral role by four applications.

INTRO We are in a new series entitled UNITED: Together in the Gospel, a study of 1 Corinthians. IN this series we are laboring for one thing, to live as a people united in the gospel of Jesus Christ. **Unity fuels God's people for kingdom mission in the world.**

READ 1 Cor 4:1-21

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ²Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. ³But 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. ⁴For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

⁶I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

⁸Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! ⁹For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹²and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

¹⁴I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶I urge you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. ¹⁸Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. ²¹What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul moves to a full defense of his ministry. He confronts some hard people in the church that are trying to discredit him so others will follow them. The hardest part is that the confrontation must occur among many innocent bystanders in the church. Nothing demonstrates the familial nature of the church more than when we labor to address our dysfunctions. A dad and / or mom knows all too well their weaknesses and shortcomings in trying to lead a family. And, these weaknesses and shortcomings always arise in moments when discipline is necessary. 1 Corinthians 4 and 5 both demonstrate this by teaching us to address problems in the church. **But praise be to God, the gospel always provides a way to address sin in every person and among the church for forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation.**

Paul begins by defining his ministry (defined by his call and commission). He uses two phrases to describe his role as an apostle, "*servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God*". These phrases provide two important understandings; he is accountable to God and authorized by God for his ministry. Paul is clear, he works for God as he serves God's people. The judgment to discredit him is "non-binding" upon him, not because the people don't matter but rather because the people do not matter more than God. In other words, he won't be judged by them because they impose worldly values on his work. Paul will not be judged, not by the church, himself or the world because God will judge him. **Accountability to God and authority from God defines Paul's ministry, what he is to be doing and how he is to do it.**

Paul places an eternal perspective on his earthly labor. What he's doing while he is on the earth is not defined by the world, but by God's call and commission upon his life. **ILLUS** The only way "roast the preacher" at Sunday lunch can really burn the man is if the man sets worldly values and accomplishments and pleasing people as his primary aim. But "roast preacher" always singles the person doing the roasting. Paul doesn't dismiss his responsibility by saying he cannot be judged. Rather, he strengthens the value of his accountability to God, the one who will ultimately judge him. **Paul is accountable to God because He authorizes his ministry.**

Paul's practice forms a model of instruction for the people. He says that he has applied this understanding to himself, Apollos and others as well. He wants the Corinthians to learn from their model. He wants them to apply an eternal perspective to the church and their lives, instead of their prideful perspective. Pride leads to ungratefulness and arrogance, clear evidence that they were not thinking in terms of Christlikeness. **Every Christian is accountable to God and should hold an eternal perspective for their lives to guard against worldly judgment.**

Paul applies a cross-centered theology to the Christian life. With the sharpest of words and comparisons he highlights their thinking that they use to compare him with them. They are wise, strong, honored, well fed, well dressed and well provided for with many possessions. But the apostles are fools, weak, disrespected, hungry, thirsty, poorly dressed and without anything, like the scum of the earth. **And God has done all this!** The comparison accurately clarifies their worldly judgment, but it brings embarrassment and shame upon the one who has made it. The harshness of these comparisons reveal how worldly values discredit God's work and servants. When we view life with worldly wisdom, we strip the "word of the cross" from any value, Holy Spirit from empowering us and God from any glory in our lives. **An eternal perspective enables Christians to apply godly wisdom to life from a cross-centered understanding that brings God glory in all things.**

Paul admonishes them to stop viewing life from a worldly perspective and encourages them to look at all things through "the word of the cross". He appeals to his relationship with them of a father through the gospel. And, in light of this relationship, that they would imitate his faith in following Jesus. He reminds them that he sent Timothy for this very purpose. Even in the face of those who like to talk out of worldly arrogance, real power in life is found in the cross of Jesus. **Every person saved by grace through faith in Jesus is empowered to live a gospel-centered, cross-shaped, Spirit-led, Jesus-following, God-honoring life of godly wisdom in the face of worldly wisdom.**

TRANS 1 Corinthians 4 helps us understand the importance of godly leaders to be united as the church labors together in mission.

MPS: Pastors are God's servants given to His church to lead people in following Jesus.

TRANS A passage like this never provides a "go to" sermon. First, it can be a hard passage in which to fully understand Paul's flow of thought. Second, when preached, it has often been used to make incorrect applications that overstate pastoral authority and justify un-Biblical honor. I pray I bring as much clarity as possible to the first, and as much Biblical truth to the second as I am able.

New Testament Apostles held a unique, one-of-a-kind ministry. Any use of the word "apostle" today must distinguish itself from those in the New Testament, or it is un-Biblical. [The position or role of "A"postle was exclusive to the New Testament to found the church. The "a"postolic gift remains an essential element by which to lead the church.] But Paul sent many non-Apostles, like Timothy, to continue to build on his ministry. This guides our understanding of this passage and our application for today. **Pastors serve God's people to continue to build on the gospel work of the Apostles.**

DISCLAIMER: IF you come from a church with very little or no organized leadership structure, with a single-pastor, hierarchical structure or status, with a harsh history of infighting, backbiting or backstabbing, or from a church that recently experienced a "schism event", I humbly ask you to listen, and try to not filter what is said through what was felt by you in another situation. I'm not asking you to forget the pain you incurred in or by the church, so to discredit it in some way. I'm

only asking you to listen today without allowing the reality of that pain to interpret what I say for you. I only ask you to trust the Lord and seek Holy Spirit's guidance in what I say. The Lord will take care of me and you.

This disclaimer simply means that every one in the room must approach the issue of church leadership by stepping outside of past experiences, wounds from former pastors or leaders and hurts from un-healed wounds and ask Holy Spirit to lead your heart and mind to hear, see and think as God's Word speaks. Holy Spirit will do this if you ask Him. And, He will also heal you in the midst of it. This takes time and much grace, always more than we at first think. Even the most personal of all our experiences must be submitted to the authority of God's Word, or we'll never submit our lives to God's leaders. [The only person Holy Spirit cannot heal from church problems and schisms is the one that will not trust Him to work.](#)

I wish I could guarantee you that LifePoint will never experience conflict or schism. If you are at LifePoint because you think we are conflict-free, then I will do you a favor today to save you from an inevitable experience later. Anyone who has been at LifePoint for any amount of time knows, we have conflicts. One of the hardest part of my job is to teach you how to rightly regard me from a Biblical teaching perspective. This teaching includes others in our leadership, but it is much easier for me to tell you how to regard them than it is me. LPC is not a perfect place because there's not one perfect person in the place. But from our beginning we've held a structure and system of accountability in leadership. So, what I'm doing today is preaching against you and me, and all the trouble any of us could cause by proclaiming Christ crucified so we can believe and trust in Jesus and walk in godly wisdom, together.

TRANS So with this in mind, let me repeat today's main point.

MPS: Pastors are God's servants given to His church to lead people in following Jesus.

TRANS If the church is to faithfully follow Jesus and engage God's mission in the world, she must embrace her leaders from God, to follow them and imitate their way of life.

OBJ: Four applications shape how the church understands and regards the biblical role of a pastor.

NOTE: I use the term "pastor" today comprehensively. This title represents both "pastor" and "elder" in LifePoint's leadership model.

1. Pastors are appointed by God to lead the church. .1-5

Paul's two phrases define how pastors should be regarded, servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Paul applied these to himself and Apollos, and surely to his other laborers as well, who extended his ministry. While the pastoral ministry is not identical to the New Testament Apostle, it is commissioned by the same Lord to extend from and build upon the same foundation. [Pastors continue the New Testament leadership of the church established by the Apostles.](#)

As "servants of Christ", pastors are authorized by God for His work. Pastors serve in ministry not from personal authority, but by identifying their role as Christ's servants in the church. Authority for pastoral ministry comes only from God and arises at the 'fountainhead' where three adjoining streams become one. First, a man must confess that he lives under God's call. Second, a man's dependence rests only in God's Word, the Bible. Third, a man demonstrates God's authority over his life by the ongoing reality of Holy Spirit's work demonstrated by godliness in character. These three streams authorize a man to serve God's people. [Pastoral authority streams through the congregation when a pastor's call, dependence on God's Word and godly character identify him as God's servant among the church.](#)

As "stewards of the mysteries of God", pastors must give an account to God. Pastors serve with an awareness that their final accountability will be given to God. (1 Peter 4:5) There is no judgment that any person or peoples could put on a pastor that would compare to the 'weight of understanding' that one will stand before God and give an account of the people, individuals with real names and faces, and how one served them as a steward of God. No threat compares to the weight of God's accountability. [Those who question the real-ness of this weight have yet to regard the pastoral role in a godly, Biblical manner. And, likely because you do not regard God's authority fully in your own life.] [Pastoral accountability holds a man to God's wisdom \(commands\) while guarding him from personal and worldly demands.](#)

God's authority and accountability guides and frees a pastor in how he serves. One way a pastor knows he is not living faithfully as God's steward is when he most wants to impress or appease people, or lives with a fear of people. A pastor can also know that a person does not regard him as God's steward when personal desires, fears or judgments are imposed to leverage him for some reason. Pastors deny their stewardship of God's mysteries when they live in fear of others. [Pastors must learn that every critique and criticism can coach, but none should be allowed to settle in to condemn.](#)

The church doesn't own or hire the pastor and neither do they authorize him. They affirm God's call and respond to His authority through His leaders. When a pastor serves as a steward, it guards his life and ministry from worldly condemnation that is sure to come, and worldly-minded people that are sure to attack. It also provides a way for the church to regard their pastors and guard against divisions to live united. [Pastors are not authorized to rule your life, nor should they operate in this manner. But they should be welcomed into your life to lead and guide you spiritually.](#)

Valuing church leaders from worldly wisdom damages the church. When you wrongly elevate a leader in an un-Biblical way, you can only be shocked when they do any wrong, or become defensive when anything comes against them or when they fail. When a person "likes" or "follows" a church leader because they have "judged" them by worldly wisdom, as we see in 1 Corinthians 4. But, worldly judgment never serves to strengthen the church's unity. [Unity strengthens in the church when all hold an eternal perspective of church leadership through which Jesus can shepherd His church.](#)

2. Pastors need a structure of accountability that empowers them to thrive. .6-7

Paul states that he has already applied this understanding to himself, Apollos and the others serving with them. They held a healthy regard for this lives and roles in the church. And the church needed to do the same. [Churches invest in their own spiritual well-being when they create a structure of accountability where pastors can thrive.](#)

An accountability structure serves to guide and free the church in the same way it serves a pastor. A church that has no system or structure of accountability for its pastors is a 'spiritual land mine', when weight shifts in the wrong direction, something's going to blow. Any person who lives without accountability is on 'borrowed time' before they experience a disqualifying failure. The church who operates with a strong accountability structure not only guides the church in the way it operates, but provides a guide for every person to learn to faithfully apply the same standard in their personal lives. The only accountability structure that can work is one that is applied throughout the church. [A strong accountability structure frees the church to do the work of ministry with confidence in her leaders.](#)

3. Pastors should be honored for the One whose work they do, not a status they attain to or hold. .8-13

Paul's contrast shows how a person disregards a pastor by valuing worldly wisdom. THIS may be the greatest wrong perpetrated among the church today in a time when "rock-star pastors" thrive. When the church demands their pastors be as cool as the world, or allow their pastors to strive after that status, they will never receive anything in the church that they can't get in more abundant supply and with a greater sense of enjoyment in the world. [The church gets 'out of whack', un-United, when pastors hold no distinction from worldly leadership or wisdom.](#)

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The way and the standard by which you regard your pastors speaks mostly about you and what you value. It demonstrates what you believe about Jesus and his body. And, the way in which you honor and celebrate your pastors will determine what you most encourage and cultivate to grow in the church. Pastors are called and expected to hold to godliness no matter what the congregation honors. [But unity is most strengthened when the church honors their pastors because God is most evident in the life of the congregation, both the pastors and the people.](#)

4. Pastors should be followed by the church out of love. .14-21

Paul draws from his relationship in the gospel with the Corinthians for his final appeal. His desire is not to control or dominate them, but to lovingly lead them. [Loving leadership in the hardest of trials and conflicts provides the defining marker of true, biblical pastoral leadership.](#)

Spiritual influence may come from many sources, but none should trump pastors in the local congregation. [#Hashtag: The best podcasts make horrible pastors.] God gives pastors to the church to model how the gospel leads a life so that life can lead others in gospel living, not as perfect people whose lives should be duplicated. [Pastors live among the flock to model a life of following Jesus by faith to lead the church in personal obedience.](#)

There is a mutual blessing of maturity from pastoral ministry. Pastors mature from leading the flock. The flock matures from following a pastor. Every time you forego your church's pastoral ministry, you thwart your and your pastors' maturity for selfish purposes. Arrogance, pride personified, is the primary cause that people refuse strong pastoral leadership. It's also a principle reason pastors grow so weary from congregations. [Pastoring depends upon a relationship defined by doctrinal truths, covenantal commitment to define responsibility and accountability, and personal participation.](#)

APPL Covenant Membership provides the only Biblical application for this relationship. Without covenant, there is no true accountability for pastor or people. We demand professionals today, so if they prove wrong we can blame or sue and not be personally responsible. We don't want to risk our lives with a pastor that may or may not be wrong. BUT, when you put your life in the hands of a plurality of pastors that are Biblically-qualified, character-assessed, congregationally-affirmed, and plurally-installed, you don't put your life in the hands of a man or men, but in God's hands. This is not a guarantee that nothing can go wrong. [Covenant Membership provides a measure and guard so that when something does go wrong it will be handled in a Biblical way to bring a gospel-driven resolution through reconciliation.](#)