

A CRISIS IN MINISTRY

by Doug Goins

Samuel was called as a boy to serve God. He grew up in the precincts of the temple and spent his entire life in spiritual leadership of the nation of Israel as a prophet, priest, and judge. In 1 Samuel 12:1-7 ff the elderly Samuel makes a statement to the entire nation. In this testimony he says that God is his witness that he has been a servant of integrity and humility, that his motives have been above reproach. At the heart of all the ministries that God called on Samuel to exercise in Israel was the Torah, the word of God. More than anything else, Samuel was a man of the word. And the nation was grateful.

I too am grateful for the wonderful old "Samuel"s that we have in our midst. They are people you may not be very much aware of, like Bob Roe and Charlie Luce and Lambert Dolphin, who for years and years have ministered the word of God to us. I am also grateful for the fact that following them are probably several generations of men and women, even young people and students, who teach the word of God here at PBC in a great variety of settings. The preaching of the Scriptures on Sunday mornings is really only the tip of the iceberg. Great numbers of folks share the Scriptures in all kinds of creative ways in our children's ministry: in Sunday School, Pioneer Girls and Boys' Brigade, back-yard Bible clubs, and midweek child care. In all of our student ministries with middle schoolers, junior-high students, high-school students, and college and university students, the Scriptures are consistently opened up. In adult ministries there are Sunday morning electives, home fellowship groups, men's and women's studies, Discovery Seminars, the Care ministry, and so many work-place Bible studies that we can't even keep up with them.

At the heart of each of these ministries are men and women who are spiritually gifted as teachers and preachers of the word of God. The pastoral staff and the board of elders are included among them but are greatly outnumbered by all the other folks who minister the Scriptures throughout our community.

I asked my own children this week who some of the teachers were who stood out for them as communicating the Scriptures. Lanie, who has been in junior high for the last two years, said without missing a beat, "Lisa Hansen!" Two years ago Lisa Hansen taught Acts to our junior high students. Lanie could still give me specific points that Lisa made in teaching the Scriptures. I asked my son Micah, who is in high school, who stands out in his memory, and he said that three weeks ago on Sunday morning, Katie Matherly, who is one of our summer high school ministry leaders, taught our high school students 1 Corinthians 13 on the supernatural love of God. Micah said she did an awesome job of teaching Scripture to them.

Many folks have commented on Rob Barrett's effectiveness as a Bible teacher with the college and university ministry during the last year while we've been looking for a college pastor. Rob has been teaching through the book of Ephesians.

If you went with us to Israel last October, you remember a gripping scene on the summit of Mount Carmel. As the sun went down, John Clement opened up 1 Kings 18 and related the story of the prophets of Baal and God's prophet Elijah, that cosmic battle between the forces of evil and the forces of God. John did a great job of capturing us with the choices that we have to make about who we're going to serve in life.

As for me, I will never forget a sermon entitled *God Loves Madonna* (see Discovery Paper 7141) that Ron Ritchie preached out of 1 Corinthians 5 on one of the last Sundays he was with us at PBC. In it he was

passionately trying to get us to understand that in the lost world, there are people we should not give up on or disdain just because of their lifestyle.

You probably have your own list of studies or sermons that stand out because God used them to change you or to arrest your attention. We all have those kinds of memories.

The focus of the passage we're going to study, 1 Corinthians 4:1-7, is teachers and preachers in the body of Christ. How should we view these people, or if we've been spiritually gifted to teach or preach in some arena, how should we view ourselves?

Let's recall the context. The apostle has been dealing with a major problem of misperception in the church in Corinth. As we've seen throughout the first three chapters, the Corinthian Christians tended to either allow their spiritual leaders virtually no influence, denigrating their spiritual giftedness, or they gave them far too much authority, putting them up on pedestals. That was evident from the parties that had developed around different teachers. Remember the rallying cries "I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos," and "I am of Cephas" in chapter 1. The church was divided into factions around these teachers, and Paul has already stressed several times how dangerous it was.

But what Paul is going to do now in 4:1-7 is present an accurate view of teachers and preachers in the church. The first five verses will focus on three things: (1) their identity, (2) what is required of them, and (3) whether they should be subject to evaluation or judgment in the ministry that God has given them.

OBEDIENT SLAVES AND FAITHFUL STEWARDS

Let's read verse 1, which addresses this issue of identity:

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Paul uses two unusual terms here. First, what does it mean to be a servant of Christ? This is not the common word for servant or minister that is usually used in the New Testament. As a matter of fact, this is the only place in Paul's writings where this specific word is used. It's the Greek word *huperetes*, which literally means "under-rower." It originally referred to the galley slaves who were chained to the rowing benches in the bottom tier of the Roman war ships. They were the lowest, most menial and despised slaves in the empire. If you saw the movie *Ben Hur*, you remember his stint as an under-rower of the Roman empire, chained to the benches, under the command of the captain of the ship, who told them when to row, when to stop rowing, when to speed up, when to slow down. When a right turn was to be made, those on the left side had to quit rowing, and vice versa. Those slaves did nothing without receiving a command from the captain of the ship. And no galley slave was ever exalted above any other galley slave. They had a common rank, and it was the lowest rank. They had the hardest labor, the cruelest punishment, the least appreciation, the most hopeless existence of all slaves in the empire.

This word gradually came to mean anybody who was under the authority of another person. The apostle Paul says that he and other teachers are galley slaves of Jesus Christ. That's what all of us are who are in leadership as teachers or preachers. In everything we're subject to Christ and to his revealed word. Paul has already made this point clearly. In 3:5-7 he says, "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth." It's the word of God that is life-giving, not the teachers. As God's servant I have to be a galley slave of the Scriptures, a minister of the word of God.

But I don't teach the word in isolation from all the other galley slaves who minister the Scriptures in our church. All of us row together in following the leadership of our Captain through the direction of his word. It's important that the under-rowers in a sense be "on the same page" of the word of God. I'm involved in that in several different ways in the course of a week. Our entire pastoral staff gathers every Tuesday morning for an hour and a half to study the Bible together. We've studied through the book of Acts and the life of Moses.

We're studying through the Psalms of Ascent right now. When the board of elders gathers together for our bimonthly meetings, once each month we spend a good portion of our time studying the Bible together so that the Captain speaks to us through his word. Most of the men and women who teach the Scriptures here at PBC are involved in smaller settings of discipleship groups or Bible study groups. For me, involvement with a group of men who study the Scriptures together on Wednesday nights is very important, because I become a learner with them, hearing the voice of the Captain, being controlled by his word, the Scriptures.

Let's look at the second unusual term Paul uses in verse 1, "stewards of the mysteries of God." The word "steward" is very common, and everyone in the church in Corinth would have known what that meant. In a Greek household the steward was a slave who administered all the affairs of the family. He directed the staff, and he was in charge of all the material resources that the household needed in order to function. In effect, he ran the entire household for his master. It was a position of great responsibility, and he had to be completely trusted by the master of the house. We still use that term today to refer to the men and women who serve us on airplanes, stewards and stewardesses. They have similar areas of responsibility while we're with them on the flight.

Teaching leaders in the church are not stewards of the church. Paul isn't saying that we manage the household of faith. The phrase is very clear: We are stewards of the provisions that the household needs to be fed; that is, the mysteries of God. We've been entrusted with these important provisions, and we're to communicate them.

Paul has already introduced us to the mysteries of God. In 2:7 he is talking about his teaching ministry in Corinth: "...We speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory...." This mysterious, hidden wisdom isn't understood by the natural man apart from Jesus Christ. It can be known only through divine revelation. It is the Biblical deposit of truth that contains the secrets of life. So a teacher or a preacher in this household of faith is to take God's revealed word and dispense it to the household. We're to administer all of it, to hold nothing back.

The apostle Paul met with the elders of the church at Ephesus on his last trip back to Jerusalem. He had served in that church and had a powerful teaching ministry among the Ephesian Christians. In Acts 20:20, 27 he reminds them of his teaching ministry there: "...I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly...I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God [or the whole counsel of God]." Basically he is saying, "I dispensed everything to you from the Scriptures, because you need it all." He says to Timothy, the young pastor, who later on will minister in Ephesus, "All Scripture is...profitable...." (2 Timothy 3:16). "Profitable" means that the Bible is practically applicable to every area of our lives. It answers all the questions that plague us. It ministers direction and encouragement and correction.

That's why the Scriptures are at the very heart of every ministry at PBC. This book is studied inductively, taught expositively, and discussed relationally in all the areas of ministry that I mentioned earlier. No teaching leader here has within himself or herself the creativity, influence, or empowering ability to communicate any life-changing mysteries. Apart from the word of God we have nothing to say. That's why PBC has been committed to expository preaching for the last forty-nine years. I don't have to think up clever things to say here on Sunday morning or anytime I teach. The Bible clearly reveals the secrets of the mysteries of life in God, and it's our job as teachers and preachers to accurately present what God has said in his word.

What is required of teachers and preachers? Paul makes it clear in 4:2:

In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.

As stewards we're not to exercise our own authority or initiative, but we're to be trustworthy, or faithful, in our responsibility of dispensing the resources of our master, of communicating the mysteries of God. Servanthood and stewardship are inseparable from faithfulness. An unfaithful servant or an untrustworthy steward is an oxymoron. Faithfulness in teaching the word includes the hard work of study. We can't handle accurately what we don't know.

God has supplied his word, his Spirit, his spiritual gifts, and his power, and all that we're asked to do is be faithful in trusting those resources. The work of being a teacher is demanding, but basically it's simple: Feed

the word of God to his people, all the word to all the people, the spiritual babies and the mature in Christ. And do it accurately. There's no glory in it, no ranking of one over another, because we are all galley slaves together under the leadership of Jesus.

PROBLEMATIC EVALUATION

But the question comes, who is going to decide if the steward has been faithful? It's a very practical issue. It can be a very difficult issue in a church like PBC where we take teaching so seriously. Verses 3-5 take us back to the issue of evaluation or comparison with which the Corinthian Christians struggled so much. We all critique and evaluate teachers. I learned that early on. I was raised in a pastor's home in a farming community in the midwest. One of the midwestern traditions was to have a big Sunday dinner right after church. The entrée was always something like fried chicken or roast beef or baked ham. But an equally common entrée after church on Sunday was grilled preacher! I heard the evaluation and criticism many times. There's a subtle, constant pressure of evaluation on anybody who is called to ministry, whether they're a Sunday School teacher, a youth leader, or a pastor.

But Paul says something really startling in verses 3-4a. First of all, he says there are many folks who are not qualified to evaluate the teacher. (In verse 4b he's going to explain who is qualified and why.)

But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted....

The first group of folks who aren't qualified to evaluate teachers among us are fellow believers. Paul is talking about the evaluation of the Corinthian congregation. Paul knew that there were a lot of them who didn't like him. They thought he was a terrible teacher, and they didn't like his emphases or his personal style. They even challenged his motives for doing what he was doing. It's really clear in 2 Corinthians that Paul was being judged harshly by those people.

When Ray Stedman taught through the book of 1 Corinthians about twenty years ago, he quoted Stuart Briscoe (see [Discovery Paper 3581](#)). Stuart identified three kinds of pressure or evaluation that teachers in the body have to deal with. One is adulation. It swells your head when you get told all the time how effective you are or what a blessing you are. A second pressure is manipulation. People try to co-opt you, to coerce you into lining up with their theological agenda, their personal interpretation of the word of God. And Stuart said that ends up tying your hands. You're not free anymore in the ministry of the word. A third kind of pressure that teachers run into is antagonism or open hostility. Stuart said that ends up breaking your heart.

I was thinking over my nineteen years here at PBC. I've experienced all three of those kinds of pressures from the body. I know most of my brothers and sisters who minister the word among us have experienced the same sorts of evaluation or critique. In response to any such "friendly fire," we have to remember who commissioned us to teach. We have to remember that we are ultimately servants of Jesus Christ, stewards of God's word. In a real sense, we don't work for the church, for the children, young people, or adults we teach. We work for the Lord and the Lord alone. John Fischer said in a song he wrote many years ago, "We have one single audience that we've got to please." It basically echoes the words of the apostle Paul to the Colossians, "...Do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men...." (3:23).

My father tells a story about Billy Sunday, the famous American evangelist in the 1920's. Billy Sunday had been a professional baseball player, and he was a national hero. He was very effective as an evangelist and had great tent meetings across the United States. Billy Sunday was colorful, very rough-cut, and had terrible grammar.

Occasionally he would be invited to preach in big, wealthy, suburban, main-line denominational churches. He had to be himself, because he couldn't act like somebody he wasn't, but he had to wear a ministerial robe and so on.

He preached in one such church, and at the end of the service, as was the custom, the pastor walked down the

center aisle with Billy Sunday and stood at the back door. Everyone had to file by and greet them. One woman came up and gushed all over Billy about how wonderful he was, what a great blessing, how effective. She went on at length. As she walked away Billy dropped his head and said, "Lord, help me not to get puffed up." A little later a gentleman came by who was very angry. He didn't even talk to Billy, but he nailed the pastor, blistering him for having this country bumpkin preach in their church. As the man walked away Billy dropped his head and said, "Lord, don't let me get puffed down."

That's the struggle of dealing with the judgment of fellow believers in the body of Christ.

Paul says, "...It is a very small thing that I should be examined...by any human court...." The term "by any human court" literally means "by man's day." That's the judgment in the court of non-Christian public opinion. As Bible teachers we are not held in very high regard by society in general. When I joined the school site council at my children's elementary school a few years ago, there was one person on the council who branded me as some sort of fanatical Bible-thumper. Without taking the time to get to know me, she refused to allow me any influence, any relationship, any interaction, because I was "the minister of a fundamentalist Bible church."

The judgment of the world can go the other way at times. The non-Christian world can praise us beyond anything that is realistic. Lambert Dolphin recently showed me a clipping from the *Orange County Register* in southern California. Every year they evaluate the twenty-five most influential people in their county. It is striking that the pastor of a very large church there is considered the third most influential person in Orange County. (He took a huge jump, because last year he was number 18.) The apostle Paul would say to us in this regard, "Don't pay any attention to the evaluation in man's court, because they don't know what to judge anything by. Their standards are wrong. They are not regenerate people. They don't understand our identity, our divine calling as trustworthy servants and stewards of Christ. And they won't recognize spiritual success in any form anyway. Just because you have big numbers or because you come across well doesn't necessarily mean that there is spiritual effectiveness from God's standpoint."

Paul goes on to say at the end of verse 3, "...In fact, I do not even examine myself." Paul doesn't even allow himself to care about his own evaluation of his ministry. Paul understands that we all tend to overestimate or underestimate our effectiveness because of our fleshly subjectivity. Paul isn't saying that when we look at ourselves as teachers, we should ignore immaturity or deny sinful failure when we are convicted of it by the Spirit of God. But he's saying that he doesn't take any final notice of self-examination, because it's just as incomplete as the evaluations of those in the church and the world. We are blinded to our own faults and failures, and on the other hand, at times we can be unaware of our spiritual successes in ministry.

He continues in verse 4, "I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted...." He doesn't know of any sin or deficiency in his life. But he knows that he could be wrong in that assessment of his own heart, even as an apostle. The line can become blurred very easily between a clear conscience and self-righteousness. So Paul isn't proud that he doesn't know of anything wrong, but he doesn't worry about the fact that he might be mistaken either, because his own evaluation, favorable or unfavorable makes no difference.

THE TRUE JUDGE AND THE REAL JUDGMENT

Now in verses 4b-5 Paul says that there is only one evaluation that matters, only one Person who is qualified to examine the ministry of teaching:

...But the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

What matters to Paul is how the Lord Jesus Christ evaluates him. (When he says "the Lord" he always means Jesus.) Paul follows the counsel that he gave to his spiritual son Timothy when he said, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God...." (2 Timothy 2:15). We serve people spiritually in our teaching and preaching

only when we're faithful servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Jesus Christ alone is the judge of the true spiritual value of that ministry. He is the only one who has the right to judge, because he is the master of the household, and we are all servants and stewards together under him. He is the only one who completely understands why ministry is being done. All we can see in each other is our external behavior. But the Lord knows our hearts, our motives, our inward intentions. That's what is crucial. We are very presumptuous when we judge external behavior in one another. We cannot fully understand the motives of others.

Another reason that we're not to evaluate the teaching ministry of other people or even our own is that any judgment that we make now is premature, "before the time." Paul says, "Wait until Jesus comes back. At the second coming of Jesus Christ we will all stand before his judgment seat." Remember 3:13: "...Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it [that will be the appropriate time], because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work." On that day there may be a lot of high-profile teaching ministries that we thought were incredible that turn out to be wood, hay, and stubble. And the ministry of a Sunday School teacher who spent thirty years laboring in the obscurity of the same four-year-old Sunday School class may be gold and silver and precious stones. God's timing for judgment and evaluation is perfect; ours is premature. Remember, this evaluation, the judgment seat of Christ, comes at the end of the age, not at the end of the meeting.

Again, Paul is not saying that we are never to judge the actions of people who do wrong. We can't take a verse like this as an excuse for a sinful lifestyle. In the next chapter Paul is going to name names and expose a specific sin of immorality, a man living in sin with his mother-in-law, and say it's got to stop because it's wrong. But here his appeal is for us to acknowledge our limitation in reading hearts, to stop judging motives. We're not to assume that we have someone all figured out, because that's playing God. We're thinking we have the right to make the kind of judgments about each other that God does.

I confess I have failed miserably in this area. I am so presumptuous, so premature in evaluating people, judging hearts and motives. Paul says to stop doing it, because we're setting ourselves up for deep disappointment and ultimately for division in the body of Christ.

In verses 6-7 Paul is going to summarize three things that we can all commit to in this church, whether we're teachers or those who benefit from the teaching ministry of others. There are three heart attitudes in these three verses that are going to bring us greater freedom before the Lord, before the Scriptures, and before one another. The question in verses 6-7 is, How can we encourage our teachers and preachers to mutuality in relationship in the body and to humility in ministry?

SUBMISSION TO GOD'S WORD

The first response is in verse 6a. We have to be willing to follow the apostolic model of Paul and Apollos, and be submissive to the authority of the Bible:

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written....

"What is written" means the Old Testament Scriptures. Both Paul and Apollos were faithful stewards. Each of them had served the church in Corinth in humility, and each had gladly supported the teaching ministry of the other. There had been no fleshly evaluation of each other. Paul says here that he's using himself and Apollos as illustrations, because the Corinthians can all remember how these men conducted themselves, having lived with them. He wants to help the Corinthians understand and apply the truths that we've surveyed in the first five verses. And he is addressing everybody in the church.

His words are like the testimony of Samuel at the end of his life: "I've been a man of integrity and humility. I've been faithful in my ministries of prophesying, judging the nation, and performing priestly duties. I've been faithful to the word of God." Paul says he and Apollos are both controlled by Biblical revelation. The Bible forbids competition, comparison, and judging one another according to the flesh.

He addresses them as brothers here: "We're in this together, brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ." He calls us as well to refuse to judge and evaluate each other and to emulate the faithfulness, humility, and mutual submission of Paul and Apollos.

AVOIDING ARROGANT COMPETITION

The second call, in verse 6b, is to be honest about our own competitiveness in relationships:

...In order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

"Arrogant" can be rendered "proud," or literally "puffed up." The Corinthian problem was pride and arrogance, which resulted in rivalry among them over loyalty to their favorite teachers. When that happens in a church, it can develop into competition among various teaching leaders in the congregation. Adulation has swelled the heads of many young teachers. Many teachers start believing they are the best teacher in the house. But the other kinds of pressure can have an equally corrosive effect. Manipulation and antagonism have driven many young teachers out of the ministry in discouragement. All are destructive. They are divisive and can destroy churches.

The good news here is that these things can be eliminated when we repent of pride, party spirit, and competition; when we allow the Scriptures to control how we think about our teaching leaders, refusing to take sides or choose the ministry of one over another. And once that kind of purity is established in relationships, it will have a wonderfully liberating effect on all of our teachers in the body and all the others as well. It will encourage us as teachers to crucify the flesh, whether we're tempted toward self-aggrandizement or self-denigration, personal conceit or a personal sense of worthlessness. Loving, unifying acceptance is what will help us deal with those sinful tendencies that we have as teachers.

THE ANTIDOTE TO PRIDE

Paul makes the third wonderful point in verse 7. The antidote to pride is the recognition that all we have and all we are is a gift of God. Listen to these great rhetorical questions Paul asks to conclude this section:

For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

This echoes Paul's words in 1:4-5: "I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him...."

That first question about superiority in verse 7 reminds me of when I was working on staff at Mount Hermon Christian Conference Center. I was only twenty-two years old, and I went to Bill Gwinn, the executive director, and asked him to pray for me that I would stay humble. Bill kind of chuckled and asked me what I had to be proud of.

Paul's question is, Why would you ever regard yourself as superior to anybody? What a foolish perspective! And what do we have that we haven't received as a gift from our generous heavenly Father? That's the point of verse 7. We can't take credit for the gifted teachers among us, God put them all there. And if you are a teaching leader with spiritual gifts of prophesying or teaching, where did you get those gifts? You didn't create them, God did. We can't view ourselves as some kind of self-made Bible teachers.

That's where the boasting mentioned in the third question comes in. If they possessed only what someone else had given them, why were they boasting as if they had created or earned the things themselves? Boasting is totally foolish, whether people are teachers or those who are being taught. The fact that we owe everything to the grace of God means that boasting or being proud is silly.

When Ray Stedman was teaching through this book, he told a story about a young preacher who preached a sermon as a guest in a church. He preached with great impact and freedom, and he was tremendously well-received. He really sensed that God was blessing him. Then the leaders of the church took him out to

lunch and praised him for what a great ministry he'd had among them. (I would say, by the way, that whenever you go away from home you seem to do better. Nobody knows all your foibles and weaknesses. The farther you get from home, the more expert people think you are somehow in your role as a teacher and a preacher.) Driving home afterward with his wife, this young man, basking in this glow of success, mused to his wife, "I wonder how many great preachers there are in the world?" "One less than you think," she replied.

Three times in verse 7 we see the word "receive." It has the beautiful idea of receptivity, open-handedness to a generous, gracious God who loves to gift us as teachers and as his body. We are called to be grateful for all the gifts that he has given us. We can be thankful for teachers among us who see themselves as servants and stewards and who are faithful to follow Christ in their teaching and leadership. We can be thankful that we don't have to judge anymore. What a tremendous burden lifted off of us! We don't have to evaluate one another or try to read each other's hearts. It's risky. We can be thankful that Jesus is doing it, so we can resign from that position. We can be thankful for the models of godly men like Paul and Apollos and Samuel, and in our body Bob Roe and Charlie Luce and Lambert Dolphin. They have modeled for us submission to the word of God and to each other. We can be thankful that we can confess and repent of the sin of pride and be forgiven. We don't have to go on tearing at each other and taking sides against one another. And finally, most of all, we can be thankful that everything we are, everything that we have in life and ministry, is a gift from our heavenly Father.

Catalog No. 4516
1 Corinthians 4:1-7
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July 27, 1997

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