

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (22-11-1998 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

1 Corinthians 3:5-9

Introduction

Paul goes on to look at the place of God's servants in His work. The carnal Christian, the one born of the Spirit but not led and controlled by the Spirit, gets everything out of proportion and distorted. He does not understand or see men's place and God's place in the work of the Gospel.

This happens in every generation. The basic problem is failure to understand how God works, His designs and His purposes, and where men fit in. When we understand this relationship, the result should be that we see much more of God, and much less of ourselves and our own importance, and not giving so much adulation and praise to others.

The place of men in the purposes of God

The trouble in the church arose around two men – Paul and Apollus. The people were ganging up around these men. "Paul's my man. He's better than the other. Never mind about the other – listen to Paul." The same things were said of Apollus. One was played off against the other. Soon there were two camps or cliques, with all the rivalry, jealousy and backbiting.

Paul and Apollus both had their place in God's plan. They were not meant to be seen as rivals or competitors. They were meant to compliment each other, to fit together, be part of one team but each with different functions. Paul's work was to plant the church. He made the first advances with the Gospel. The people were drawn to Christ. He was the man with the vision. **It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation** (Romans 15:20). He was a pioneer evangelist. Then Apollus came along. He watered the seed sown by Paul. He was primarily a teacher; he helped the converts to grow. He was eloquent and able to deal with questions asked by the Jews.

Between these two men there was perfect harmony. Each had a crucial part to play in the life of the church. They had different functions. Each needed the other. There was no jealousy or rivalry between the two of them. Their brotherliness lasted throughout their Christian lives. Apollus is mentioned by Paul in one of his last epistles (Titus 3:13). They were on the best of terms, cooperative and friendly.

The problem was not with Paul and Apollus but with the immature church members. One group claimed that Paul's preaching was so much more powerful than Apollus's. The other group claimed to have learnt so much from Apollus that Paul had never even mentioned to them.

Paul was amazed at their childish talk and dangerous mischief making. It would split the church in two if it carried on. **What, after all, is Apollus? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe** (1 Corinthians 3:5). They were

merely servants. The same word δῆκονος is used for the servants who drew water at the marriage in Cana (John 2:9). And the same root as the word δῆκονεω used for Peter's mother-in-law waiting on Jesus after he healed her (Mark 1:31). This word is used for waiters at a table, then for servants in general, and then the technical term "deacons" within the church (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8,10,12). Here is a picture of Christian workers – preachers, evangelistic workers, pastors, teachers etc. Table waiters, waiting to receive guests' orders and bring them food, taking their instructions from the manager.

So Paul emphasises that they are just servants "through whom they came to believe", not "*in* whom they came to believe". Do not put servants on a pedestal, do not worship them, he implores. There is such folly in idolizing men and playing one off against the other. The Bible tells us to respect our leaders. **Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work** (1 Thessalonians 5:12,13). They are only sinners saved by grace, who have obeyed and accepted the responsible job of caring for souls. **Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give account** (Hebrews 13:17). They are nothing in themselves, but appointed and gifted by God, and answerable to Him one day. Treating them as God, and worshipping them is ridiculous. They are men, servants, errand boys. Call no man master. We have only one master. The rest are all brethren.

This is ever relevant in every age. Personality cult is strong in Christian circles - preachers with followers. And to those followers, they are virtually God. They can do no wrong, say no wrong. Often seen it among young men going into the ministry, idolizing one man, reading his books, dressing like him, copying his mannerisms in the pulpit, even down to the accent of his voice. Also seen the dangers where a church has an associate pastor, and one is played off against the other. And when a church has a vacancy for a long period of time, so often attendance drops off, because there is no personality to stop the gap, revealing that too often loyalty is not to God and the church, but to a man.

The problem in all these examples is one of wrong priorities. God, His cause, His work are not in the centre of the picture. Instead, it is men, and all the excitement of following men. We have a wrong estimate of men because we have a wrong estimate of God. Paul was so sensitive to anything which would detract or distract from the centrality and glory of God in the work of God. **Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord** (1 Corinthians 1:31).

The strategy of God

The emphasis is that God is the master workman. Paul planted as an evangelist. Apollus watered as a teacher. But it is God who keeps on giving the increase. Let us be clear about what men can do and what God can do.

Men left to themselves are capable of doing all sorts of things in Christian work. Interest in them and their influence can be extensive. They can indoctrinate, organise, educate, move people emotionally, convince them intellectually, amuse and entertain. But only God can give life, can regenerate, recreate, remould, renew, and cause life to

grow and develop. No one else can, whatever skill, gifts, training, qualifications and reputation they may have. No one else can give spiritual life. That is God's sphere.

The picture we are given here is of the Gospel work being God's fundamentally and basically. The whole thing was planned in eternity, and carried out in time. God gave His Son to be the Saviour. He poured out the Holy Spirit. He brought the church into being and raises up His people and servants. He gives gifts, and makes them pastors, teachers, preachers, witnesses, and servants in various spheres. He moves them about and directs their course.

C.f. a master chess player, who arranges the pieces according to their different power and usefulness. Each piece depends on the other, backing up and supporting each other. The player makes his moves in anticipation of counter offensive by the enemy. Perhaps if the pieces could speak they would argue, "Why move me to that square?", but the chess player knows what he is about, and is directing the game in accordance with the purpose in his mind.

Then it is God who pours out the Holy Spirit on the church and on people's lives. He brings people to Himself and causes them to grow and mature in the Christian life as they yield and obey Him. Then at the end He gives rewards to His servants for their part in His service. He does not reward us for our gifts and our successes, but for the quality of our labour. That brings the humblest on a level with the most exalted. It is faithfulness and not success that is the criterion. The faithful missionary, who works away in obscurity with apparently little fruit, may well have greater reward than the evangelist who wins thousands for the Lord, but knows little self-denial and faithfulness.

The work is God's from first to last. **For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field, God's building** (1 Corinthians 3:9). This has a bearing on the problem Paul is facing. There is no place for over-valuing the servant. Fix eyes on the master. It is not the chess pieces that are our concern, but the chess player. We must not see each other as rivals and competitors, comparing one with another, proud of our gifts and jealous of others.

The Gospel is not a human enterprise. It is God's work. He has the master plan, made in eternity. He gives different gifts, arranges different opportunities, raises up workers and distributes rewards. It is not for us to compare, be jealous, interfere or criticize. Nor should we use Christian work to make a name for ourselves, or money, or power over others. Everyone will have to give account of himself to God.

We do not know His plans or guidance for others. So there is no place for us to affect superiority in terms of intellect, age, gifts, or status. We all need each other. Let God make the assessment. On prize-giving day there will be many surprises.

Practical lessons from this passage

We need to direct our eyes, hearts and thinking to the centrality and glory of God. God is to be the centre of our lives, our thinking and our Christian service. The Gospel work is God's work and God's sphere. He will not let us interfere in it. He is jealous for His glory, and will not give His glory to another. One of the keys to true

usefulness to God is total humility before God, i.e. God at the centre of life, and not self. This will be costly.

Alexander Whyte invited a young man to preach at his church in Edinburgh. The young man was getting quite a reputation in Edinburgh as a great preacher. He entered the pulpit full of himself. Then his mind went blank, and he made a dreadful mess of the whole thing. He forgot what he was going to say. It was a total disaster. He came down from the pulpit broken-hearted, and in the vestry he asked Whyte, "What went wrong, sir?". The reply, "Well, laddie, if you had gone up into the pulpit the way you came down, you would have had more chance of coming down the way you went up."

God-centred Christian service is the only way. This does not mean every preacher has to have a retiring personality, or grovelling obsequiousness. But he must recognise the deep work of grace in his life. When he rightly recognizes his position before the Lord, his attitude will be right. How much Christian work is self-centred and self-directed. We are nothing more than servants. The master will provide the direction and the energy and all for His glory. We are simply there to do as we are bidden. We are not the managing directors, but simply labourers. We have no right to impose conditions, restrictions or limitations. We simply must make ourselves available.

Wilber Chapman said his whole life had been altered by a statement by F.B.Meyer, "Our usefulness in God's service is largely affected by the question of whether we work for God or whether we allow God by His Spirit to work and speak through us."

Bishop Hanley Moule, totally surrendered his life to Christ in 1884. He was aware he was in the hands of the absolute master, and therefore had no interests outside His. He sought no gain or praise except for Him. "I am comforted that it is in the Master's Interests to meet all my needs – physical, intellectual and spiritual. God uses a man ready to be nothing that the excellency of power may be of God and not us. We must be ready for pride and self interest to go to dust that we may be all in all." [unclear where this quotation ends].

This leads to a life of prayer. It is vital for the individual and for the church. Our lives have to be fully surrendered. We do not pray wanting God's help to get what we want for our comfort, but we pray wanting His supplies and help to do His will for His glory. Totally available. Are we there as individuals or as a church?