

February 27, 2011
Are Pastors People, Too?
1 Corinthians 4:1-7

A lay person in our congregation really ought to preach this sermon! 1 Corinthians 4 is about pastors. It may be a conflict of interest for me to speak about how a church ought to treat a pastor! What I propose to do is to stick very close to the biblical text - just so you can evaluate everything I say!

Pastors as servant leaders (4:1)

Paul had got the not so subtle impression that the Corinthians didn't think much of him. So, in 4:1-7, he deals with that. In v.1 he raises one of the paradoxes with which pastors throughout history have wrestled - on the one hand we are "*servants of Christ*": on the other hand we are leaders entrusted with education and (I hope!) some spiritual gifts and wisdom.

The word "*pastor*" literally means "*shepherd*." Jesus and the early church use the word to describe those who had a specific function in the church. Alas, exactly what pastors do - what it means to "*shepherd*" a church - has never been clearly defined, has changed and evolved over the centuries, and morphed in different cultural contexts. When I was working on my doctoral thesis I interviewed a number of pastors about their self-identity. I asked them to complete the phrase, "*Pastor as _____*." When I suggested "shepherd" one person was very blunt - "*No, not a shepherd. I was a missionary in rural Mexico and I know sheep. Sheep are smelly and stupid - I don't want to think of my congregation that way.*" Among the answers I did get were "*Pastor as octopus*" and "*Pastor as midwife*" ... fascinating variety - and lack of clear consensus.

Part of it, however, is this tension between servanthood and leadership. Shepherds care for a flock, but they also provide leadership.

Some pastors are powerful leaders who run rough-shod over their congregations. They take very seriously their "special calling" from God. They may be strong, charismatic leaders, but often they have no accountability. One Lutheran pastor talked about the Germanic tradition of "Herr Pastor" - when the pastor spoke, people jumped! We all know of many of these strong leaders who have "fallen" in any number of ways.

Some pastors emphasize servanthood. They will do absolutely anything for anyone. But they have little vision for leadership. It may be they just don't have a sense of direction. Or, it may be that official or unofficial power structures in their churches hog-tie any plan they make. One of my colleagues jokes about a chair of his Church Board who defined his role as "*making sure the pastor doesn't get away with anything.*" In frustration, they are servants, but not leaders.

The challenge I face - like every other pastor - is being a "servant leader." You can appreciate something of the paradox - something of the contradiction -- but also something of the beauty of that metaphor. The idea of servant leadership is different from models of leadership found in business, government, or other organizations. It makes the church unique and ...interesting.

Pastors as faithful (4:2)

In verse 2, Paul emphasizes that pastors need to be faithful to the responsibility given to them. How do we evaluate pastors? Among pastors themselves, the mostly commonly used criteria are Sunday morning attendance, church building size and appearance, budget, and the number of programs. Sometimes in our more spiritual moments we consider conversions, baptisms or membership growth. Among lay people, how do we evaluate pastors: their preaching ability, their sense of humour ... the way they perform weddings and funerals. "*Faithfulness*," Paul says, is the criteria by which we ought to recognize our pastors.

What does faithfulness mean? Faithfulness means obedience to Christ (as a servant *of Christ* [v.1]). In other words, is this pastor concerned about the Kingdom of God? Is this pastor trying - albeit imperfectly - to live by biblical standards? Now, none of us is perfect! But is the pastor growing spiritually? Faithfulness also means commitment to a particular ministry. Pastors are committed to building their congregation in dialogue and discussion with the church. Pastors are faithful as they give of themselves to see their church grow spiritually.

You know what I like about this? It means that as we look at our ministry, what does God look for? Does he look at numerical growth as a sign of "success?" No. Does he look at our budget? No. He looks at our faithfulness. He looks at how we are doing at living Christian-ly as individuals (are we committed to maturing as believers? do we aspire to the same lofty standards we like to see in our pastors? are we committed to giving of our selves, sacrificially, to serve God?). And He looks at how faithful we are as a congregation - do we love one another? do we care for one another? do we model the love of Jesus Christ in our church?

Pastors as servants - of whom? (4:3-4)

I appreciate that in 4:3-4 Paul does not pretend to be perfect! "*My conscience is clear*," he says, "*but I am not innocent*." Perhaps the Church of Jesus Christ would be better off if more of us pastors acknowledged that - in big and small ways - we're not perfect. Sometimes we give off the impression that we are "*holier than thou*." We're not! One of the titles often ascribed to us is "*the Reverend*." I use it occasionally because most people (particularly non-church people) recognize it. But I don't like it! It implies that somehow a clergyman is more reverent or spiritual than other people. And, that, frankly, is nonsense! I also appreciate the lines of accountability Paul describes in these verses. He is not primarily accountable to his own feelings (whether he feels "good" about his ministry or not). He is not even primarily accountable to the church (whether the church thinks much of him or not). "*It is the Lord who judges me*" he says.

There is a lot of challenge in here for both a pastor and for a church. For the pastor, this verse could be used to escape all accountability. *"Let your conscience be your guide and forget what anyone else thinks,"* might seem a decent paraphrase. In the Baptist tradition, we emphasize that individuals can relate directly to God (without need of a priest) and understand Scripture (without need of official "interpretations"). But we can take this too far. We could say that every strange and absurd belief or behaviour is acceptable because God told *me* so. The text doesn't say that. The text emphasizes that there is an absolute standard for our beliefs, our ethics, and our behaviour. That standard is God - and the truth God has revealed for us in Scripture. So we need to know Scripture, to wrestle with what it means, and to diligently apply it to our lives. We do that through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works through the church (3:16). So, yes, the pastor is accountable to the faithful church community.

For the church, the challenge is to be careful of the standards we use to evaluate pastors. In my experience - as a lay person, and now as a pastor - we often use a business metaphor to understand pastors. A church hires a pastor just as a business hires an employee. We know the pastor is a "servant" - the pastor is our "servant." This text challenges us to a much broader vision. Yes, a pastor is called by a church, and is worthy of his hire. But the pastor is not the *"servant of the church"* but *the "servant of Christ"* (4:1). The pastor is accountable to the church, but ultimately is accountable to God. So as a church we need to ask ourselves, how can we help our pastors be the most faithful servants of Christ that they can be? How can we help our pastors be the best, godly leaders they can be?

Do not judge (4:5-7)

Paul goes on to warn the Corinthians about judging him. Judgment is the Lord's prerogative. Not ours (Matthew 7:1-5). In 4:6-7, Paul emphasizes that he and his colleagues try to live by these principles. He implies, however, that some people were going beyond Scripture, inventing their own rules, regulations, and standards. They were boasting about how much wiser they were than Paul, or Apollos, or others in the church. They were using the wrong criteria to evaluate Paul. They did not understand that Paul was accountable to God. They ought not to have been judging him at all!

Part of this is a comment on biblical literacy. Paul suggest the Corinthians ought to have known better. They ought to have known Jesus' words. How can we evaluate anyone when most of us have no idea what the biblical standards are? Do we adopt business models because we don't know biblical models? Sadly, biblical education is not highly valued in many churches, so we find interesting ways to evaluate clergy!

Some churches take a negative approach to pastors: our pastor has shortcomings: he is not Bill Hybels or Bill Gates! He needs to shape up or ship out - or at least reads *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Our church is not growing under his ministry -- Nasdaq hasn't listed us yet!

Our pastor is not as innovative as Rick Warren! He isn't as good a speaker as Barak Obama, let alone the evangelistic gift of Billy Graham! Paul would say, "*You are too worldly!*" (3:1-3) - "*Do not go beyond what is written*" (4:6). "*Is your pastor faithful?*" Paul asks.

I invite you to continue with a positive approach to pastors (which has been my experience at First B, anyway!): how can we help our pastors be the best they can be? How can we help them be the most faithful servants of Christ they can be? How can you do that? Pray for us! I meant it! It is only through the power of God that any of us can make a difference in Christian ministry! Encourage us! You would never believe the power of one small, sincere complement!

Above all, join with me in reflecting on what church is really all about. Over the past couple of sermons on 1 Corinthians we emphasized that (1) the church is a group of people who love Jesus Christ, who seek to be obedient (faithful) to him, and to serve him; and (2) the church's power comes through the Holy Spirit: God is the one who builds the church.

Pastors are facilitators of these processes. We encourage people to love Christ; we teach about what it means to be faithful to him; we try to help people find opportunities to serve him; we pray for our church; and we encourage others to pray. There is certainly an aspect of servanthood to Christ in this: we are trying to be obedient in this ministry of making disciples (Matthew 28:19). There is also an element of leadership and encouragement.

But we cannot do it alone! Jesus did not do his work alone. He gathered others around who worked with him. Pastors are part of a team of ministers. Another word used to describe us is "*minister*," literally "*servant*." I don't use it much to describe myself, either! Because later on we'll note that 1 Corinthians teaches us that we are all "*ministers*" - all servants - all colleagues in building this enterprise called "church." Pastors have a specific function: we are shepherds who use our gifts to teach, to preach, to encourage, to administrate, to care - whatever gifts we have. But we also rely on the gifts of others: to serve and help, to teach, to encourage, to give generously, to lead, to evangelize, to share wisdom and knowledge, to heal, to discern, even to speak in tongues and interpret tongues.

No pastor has all gifts! God calls each pastor to use what gifts he does have faithfully. The pastor is responsible to God to use the gifts he has. But every church has all the gifts -- among its members - it needs to be faithful and obedient to God's calling for it. God's desire is that - as a church - we all use the gifts we have. Isn't that exciting!? Your ministry - your service - is just as important as mine or anyone else's! This church cannot thrive without you! May we be faithful to the trust God has given us!

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First Baptist Church
1614 - 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
bruce@firstb.net