

Principles of Leadership

Scripture: I Corinthians 3:1-9

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Morning Service**

People of God, today we have ordained new office bearers in this church. They, along with the other elders and deacons, form the Council of this Church, the body that provides the spiritual leadership for this congregation.

That's a great challenge. How should they view their task? What does it mean to provide leadership in the church? Today, there are many different models of leadership, from those who see leaders as agents of change to those who see them as preservers of tradition. There are different styles of leadership, from the visionary who is always in the foreground to the quiet worker, active behind the scenes.

But what does the Bible say about leadership? What basic principles ought to guide us? Our scripture reading for this morning provides some basic principles that ought to guide and direct those who are leaders. And while our immediate focus this morning is on Council members, these principles apply to anyone in a leadership position, from those serving on committees to those running various church programs. How do we work together as the church of Jesus Christ, fulfilling the Great Commission of making disciples of Jesus?

Now it has to be admitted that Paul's primary purpose here is not to detail ten basic steps to successful leadership. That's not type of material we find in the Bible. Instead, Paul, here, is addressing the specific concerns and problems in the church of Corinth. But as we see him deal with those concerns and problems, we can discern some basic principles for leadership.

So what was going in the church of Corinth? Well, it was one messed up church. It had a whole host of problems, two of which are highlighted in the passage we read.

First of all, there was a great deal of spiritual immaturity amongst the

believers. They were “mere infants in Christ.” Like a baby who can only handle milk, rather than solid food, so the Corinthians were immature in their faith. But just as babies need to grow up and eat solid food, so the believers of Corinth needed to do that. But they seemed unwilling. They were spiritual immature.

Second, they were quarrelsome. That’s a reflection of their spiritual immaturity. They had quarrels amongst each other. There were divisions between various groups within the church and a great division between the church and Paul himself.

Throughout this letter and in our text, Paul addresses both of these problems: of spiritual immaturity and church division. Problems that are not unique to the church in Corinth, but seem to be a problem in many churches. But after Paul identifies these two problems in verse one to four, he begins to answer them in verse five. And as he does so, he reveals some basic principles of leadership that ought to shape the life of the church.

First of all, he points out the servant nature of leadership. He asks the question: who are these leaders? *What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul?* The answer is that they are *only servants*.

Church leaders are servants of God. They are not seeking their own glory or their own power. At least, we shouldn’t be. Sometimes, church leaders can fall into the temptation in thinking that they are building their own little empire—and in the case, of some TV preachers, these empires are not so little. But I’m not building the church of John. I’m building the church of Jesus. And the attitude in which I, and other church leaders, need to build the church of Jesus is that of servanthood.

Leaders are servants. Service is the key word. Jesus himself illustrated this point when he washed the feet of his disciples, saying to them: *You have called me Teacher and Lord and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, you Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.* It is this self-giving of oneself for others that ought to characterize leaders. Servant leadership is seeking not after one's own self interest but what is best for the church. It is willing to give one's time and energy to the fulfillment of one's duties.

But being a servant does not mean becoming a doormat, to be trodden upon by people who would abuse your servant role. It does not mean servants have no authority. In the offices of the church, we see the authority of Christ at work. Christ rules his church through these positions. As a result, we must respect these offices, heeding the advice and admonition of the elders, willing to learn mercy and compassion from the deacons, and hearing the preaching of the Word from the pastor. But we who have these

offices must always remember, we are merely servants. That's the first basic principle concerning leadership.

The second principle to recognize is that there is a diversity of tasks for leaders. We are not all commissioned to do the same thing. We have different gifts and abilities, which will result in different styles of leadership as well as different areas of strength.

That's the reason why there were differences between Paul and Apollos. It's not that they had different theological beliefs, because they agreed with each other on matters of doctrine and behavior. But they did have a different niche. Paul, you could say, was the church planter. He went into areas where the gospel had not yet come and began to preach the Word. Apollos, on the other hand, worked in the established church, building up the faith of the new converts. Paul planted the seed, Apollos watered it. The tasks are different, but both are necessary.

That continues to be true for leadership within the church. There is a diversity of roles and gifts. That's why we have three offices: ministers to preach the Word, elders to be the spiritual rulers of the church, and deacons to be the instrument of mercy. This diversity of task does not result in different degrees of importance or value. All offices are needed. A variety of leadership positions are necessary for the church to carry out her mission in this world.

In this coming year, we'll be adding a new dimension to the leadership of this church, as Joe comes to fill the position of Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. That means Team Ministry. And we had better work as a team, we had better be viewed as a team, or else this church could end up with the divisions that Corinth experienced.

As a team, we'll have different areas of responsibility. We'll need to give each other the space to do our work. (I'll have to give up my direct involvement in the youth program—though can I still come paintballing?) And you, as a congregation will need to respect the different areas of responsibility that we have. Comparisons are bound to be made, but be careful how they are expressed. We're not in competition with each other. Instead, we have a diversity of tasks. As Paul and Apollos had different tasks, so do office bearers and ministry staff in the church. That diversity needs to be respected.

But in the midst of this diversity we must also recognize a basic unity. The third principle for biblical leadership is to recognize the unity of purpose that motivates us to do our task. Paul says in verse 8: *The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose*. In terms of the agricultural illustration Paul is using here that purpose is the harvest of the

crop. For the church this harvest means the ingathering of believers from all the nations of the world.

Now we have to be careful not to have too narrow a view of this harvest. For some, this harvest is the saving souls from damnation. But that's just viewing the gospel in its milk form, rather than in terms of solid food. The gospel is more than saving souls, it is creating disciples of Jesus who demonstrate in every area of life what it means to live in the kingdom of God so that in the end God is glorified.

That's the ultimate goal: giving glory to God. It is this purpose that unifies the diversity in leadership. As a result, leadership is not be used for one's own glory and advancement but for the glory of God and advancement of his kingdom. Leadership is not be used to create monuments for oneself, saying or thinking: this is my church, this is my program. No this is the Lord's church. All programs and activities must serve him.

This leads to the fourth and most important point concerning leadership in the church: the focus must ultimately be on God. After all, whose servants are we? We are servants of the Lord. Verse five says: *the Lord has assigned to each his task*. That's why the first question asked of these new office bearers is the question, *Do you believe that in the call of this congregation God himself is calling you to these holy offices?* Whether we are in office, or teach a Sunday school class or lead a cadet group, we must realize we are working for the Lord. We are his servants, doing his work. That means we are accountable to him. It requires that we are in tune with him so that we might know his will for our lives.

That's always a challenge for those involved in the ministry of the church. Because we are busy in the work of the church, there is a danger that we neglect cultivating our relationship with the Lord. But leaders, especially, need to be people of prayer, regularly read God's Word and depending on the leading of the Spirit.

And through it all, our focus must be on God for it is God who blesses our work. As verse six says: *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow*. Only God can bless the work of our hands. It is God who ensures that the church will triumph. As a result, we cannot boast in our achievements. Nor do we have to worry about whether a program or activity will be a success. We do what we can and leave the results in the Lord's hands.

Who knows how this new team ministry will develop? The ministry opportunities are there. The potential prospects are exciting to consider. But there will be bumps along the road. Council will have to guide us through them. But we look to the Lord for guidance and blessing, knowing that while

we can plant and water the seed, only the Lord can make it grow. So let us pray that God will bless the work of our hands.

The final verse of our text really underlines this focus on God: *For we are God's fellow-workers, you are God's field, God's building.* Do you hear the God focus in this verse? It is this God-centered focus that must guide us. Whether as leaders or as those being led, we must keep our focus on God. It's a focus that will help overcome any divisions there might be within a church. It's a focus that will lead us from milk to more solid food, as we become spiritually mature. It's a focus that will unify team ministry. Because we are merely servants of the Lord. It is God who will bless our work. Because this is his church. Amen.