

Who's a Big Deal in the Church?

1 Corinthians 3:5-11

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I remember when I was a teenager, my family attended a national Christian conference in Illinois. It had the usual lineup of well-known pastors and Christian college presidents as speakers. We attended the general sessions in what seemed to me to be a massive auditorium. The speakers and leaders were paraded across the stage and they seemed larger than life to me. There was a large hotel connected to the convention center and most everybody stayed there. My dad and I walked to the elevator to go up to our room. The doors opened, we stepped in, and in the elevator were several of these famous leaders and pastors.

My dad saw this as an opportunity to say something profound and funny. He looked them over and said what I was probably thinking, *This elevator may go all the way to heaven!* They were big shots and we looked at them that way.

The summer I came to Bethel as pastor, I spoke for a week at a large Bible conference. Don't be too impressed, I wasn't addressing the general assembly. I was the teen speaker and the youth sessions were relegated to a dumpy little chapel. But since I was in the speaker lineup, I got invited to the speaker dinner time in the evening. This conference has surprisingly well-known pastors and authors. I was pretty excited about hanging out with them. I remember two in particular. One pastored a very large Assembly of God church. The other led one of the largest Presbyterian churches in the US. I really wanted to talk to them.

So at one point in the meal, I went by their table and told them I had just become a senior pastor and wondered if they had any advice for me. They invited me to pull up a chair and gave me their full attention and spent considerable time giving me advice from their years of experience. I was touched and impressed. I thought they were big shots. They apparently didn't seem to look at themselves that way.

How do you view spiritual leaders in the church? How should spiritual leaders view themselves? We have already seen that the Corinthian culture idolized the wise man and the orator. They were the heroes and celebrities of the day. The problem was that the Corinthian Christians were doing the same thing. They were making celebrities of the teachers and speakers in the church. They were putting them on pedestals and finding their identity as followers of them.

We concluded last week with 1 Corinthians 3:4, *For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?* In 1:13, Paul asks, *Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?* The questions are rhetorically written to make it obvious that there is only one person who deserves our following and identity – the One who died for us and in whose name we are baptized – Christ. **The Corinthians were making much of who they shouldn't and making little of who they should.** Of course this is a huge problem in the modern American church. Paul continues his rebuke in verse 5:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants

and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:5-11)

We are going to stretch a little far in the amount of text we cover because the core of what he is leading to is in verse 11. First, Paul puts Christian leadership in perspective.

Christian Ministry/Leaders in Proper Perspective

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? (1 Corinthians 3:5)

Paul begins with two rhetorical questions. Apollos? Paul? Who were they? The Corinthians knew who they were. Apollos was a leader and powerful preacher in Corinth. Paul was commissioned by Jesus Himself as an Apostle, authored 13 books of the New Testament, and founded the church at Corinth. Apollos and Paul would seem to qualify as big deals in the church. We'd be pretty excited to get in an elevator with them. Yet, what are they really? Are they big shots? Are we to memorialize them? Are we to build churches and monuments in their honor?

To this Paul says, *What is Apollos? What is Paul?* Who are we?

Merely Servants

Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. (1 Corinthians 3:5)

Paul and Apollos did have an important role. They were tools God used to bring the gospel and salvation to the Corinthians. However, notice their status in doing this. The Greek word for servants is the familiar *diakonos*. This is most familiar to us as the title of deacon. The word means servant. It was used for menial workers in the day. It was often used for those who waited on tables, like a modern day busboy.

When I saw this, my mind went immediately back to several summers I spent in high school working as a busboy at Friedman's Café in Waterloo, Iowa. We had a uniform, a white shirt and a bowtie. My equipment was a tub in which to place the dishes and a cleaning rag. I took the job seriously. So there I was summer after summer, cleaning up other people's messes, vacuuming the explosion of crackers around some kid's seat, hauling dirty dishes back to the dishwasher. In all those summers and all those tables, you know what I never heard? *Hey busboy, you are amazing!* Nobody really pays attention to busboys. We're rather invisible. We're necessary but unremarkable.

What is Apollos? What is Paul? What is Pastor Gary? What is Pastor Steve? What is Billy Graham? What is Rick Warren? What is (pick your favorite Christian hero)? *Diaconos*. Spiritual busboys. Merely servants. Do we build monuments to servants? No. It's not that Christian leaders don't have a role. We do. What is it?

Servants through whom you believed. (1 Corinthians 3:5)

God's servants have a very important role. Christian ministry on all levels of a church's ministry is vital. Jesus Himself came as a servant, so serving is highly prized in the church. However, it says spiritual leaders are "servants THROUGH whom you believed." It doesn't

say servants IN whom you believed. (1 Corinthians, Fee, p. 131.) There's a big difference between the two.

When I stand on an ocean beach or gaze at a brilliant rainbow, I don't look at the beauty and say, *These glasses are awesome!* The glasses are not the beauty; the glasses don't make the beauty. The glasses have a role to play. They help me see the real beauty. I see the beauty through them, not in them.

Whenever God uses somebody to spiritually bless us or help us, we can certainly be thankful for them just like I am very thankful to have glasses in my life. But I have to see the pastor, mentor, disciple or teacher in perspective. They are tools, means by which I am enabled to see real beauty in God's Word and in God's Son. Every teacher, pastor, elder, leader, small group leader, disciple or mentor that has ever blessed us or helped us is someone *through* whom but not *in* whom we have believed.

In context...insignificant

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

Paul draws on a familiar analogy, farming or gardening. He says, *Apollos and I? We are field workers.* In the Roman culture, serving in the field was the bottom of the job market. Field working was not held in high regard. From the Roman perspective, harvests were very important but not the workers in the field. To help us here, let's review how a field produces a harvest.

Farming entails placing seed into the ground. After said seed is in the ground, the seed requires adequate water or it will not grow. Most farmers plant seeds in the field, pray for rain or irrigate the field. The expectation is that a healthy seed in a fertile soil with adequate water will grow and produce a harvest. That's how it works. The fields around Northwest Indiana are a daily testimony to the planting/watering/growing process. Have I lost anyone?

Paul illustrates his point very simply. Can the person who plants a seed make the seed grow? Can a person who waters a seed make a seed grow? Even today, the answer is no. My dad was an engineer for John Deere for 40 years. Farming is different these days. Farmers today have GPS on their equipment. Their planters count and calculate seed output and measure field production. Some new tractors today don't even require a driver. They punch in the GPS coordinates and the tractor plows the whole field without a driver in it.

In spite of all of this, you know what the wizards at John Deere and the horticulturalists at Iowa State University cannot do? They can't make a seed grow. They can create the conditions for it, but they cannot make it grow.

Spiritually the same thing is true. For all the millions of people that have responded to Billy Graham and Luis Palau and George Whitefield and D.L. Moody and all the rest, not one person has been saved or has grown *because* of them. They are not the cause of the salvation, only the tools. Some plant. Some water. But where does salvation and transformation come from? It comes from the only person who makes anything grow. God. Why? 1 Corinthians 2:10 says, *these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.*

Therefore, from the perspective of redemption and salvation, pastors and evangelists and elders and deacons and leaders of all kinds are largely insignificant. Then who is significant? Who is a big deal in the Church? Who should we put on the pedestal? Whoever it is that can

actually cause the seed of salvation to grow. That's the key person. The Apostle Paul couldn't do that. Apollos couldn't do that. Jesus' mother Mary couldn't do that. Mary Magdalene couldn't do that. Martin Luther couldn't do that. D.L. Moody didn't do it once. No pastor in this church has ever done that. I certainly can't do that this morning.

But God can. He does. He will. Therefore, how should spiritual leaders view themselves? How should God's people view them in comparison to Christ? Insignificant. Merely servants.

Does this undermine church authority? Not at all. The Bible has much to say about how God leads His church through godly leadership. It doesn't undermine church authority, but it does destroy Christian celebrity. What would Paul have to say about churches in America with pastors blatantly promoting themselves? What would Paul say to the way we (and I am as guilty as any) fawn over the Christian celebrities of our day? They are servants God chooses to use. But we don't build monuments to servants.

I spent some time thinking about why we do this. Why do we make a big deal about somebody who writes a successful book or pastors a giant church or that God blesses us through in some way? Why do we put people on pedestals?

It seems to me it is because we can relate to them, we feel a connection with them, and we secretly want to be like them. The same is true in the world. Celebrities are celebrities because people idolize them and want to be like them. The problem is that they, after all, are humans like us. Since they are human, they are also flawed like us. They are sinners. This is true of our Christian celebrities as well. This is the problem. How many people walk away from Christianity because a spiritual leader failed or disappointed them? We run into that a lot. Some leader or spiritually significant person in their life failed them and the failure shatters their faith because their faith was in the leader, parent or mentor.

The real problem here is that we fail to realize something wonderful about Jesus. He is as human as any Christian leader we admire. He is 100% human. He is just like us. If we got that we'd realize that not only can we relate to Him but He perfectly relates to us. We can relate to His story of poverty, pain, suffering, betrayal, sorrow and grief. He can relate to our poverty, pain, suffering, betrayal, sorrow and grief. In other words, He's all that we relate to in our heroes, only with one massive difference.

When He's on the pedestal of our hearts, He will NEVER disappoint. He will never fail. He will never morally compromise. He will never be selfish. We will never get close to Him and discover Him to be anything less than the perfect, glorious, beautiful Savior we want Him to be. Recently I said that you could get close to whatever Christian celebrity you think is all that and you'll find out he or she is not. If you think otherwise, you don't know him well enough.

Christ is the shining exception. If you don't think so, you don't know Him well enough. See the irony? **We put Christians too high because we don't know them well enough and we put Christ too low because we don't know Him well enough!**

This is the truth Paul is aiming at. He changes his illustration from agriculture to architecture. In future messages we will spend time on the building theme he begins. I just want us to get to verse 11.

For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is

building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:9-11)

Jesus – Foundation of the Church

Fields and foundations, planters and builders. Do you see the parallel? Farmers plant and water. Builders put down foundations and construct on them. But with construction, it all starts with the foundation. If you don't get the foundation right, the whole house is in jeopardy.

There was a house in my old subdivision that some people bought and after they bought it they discovered the foundation wasn't right. They put signs up around their house complaining about it until the builder came back and made it right. You have to get the foundation right. What if you have a leaky foundation? Or a cracked foundation? Or an uneven foundation? Or a shaky foundation? Those foundations turn out to be no foundations at all.

Paul is telling us today that trying to build our faith on any foundation but Christ is perilous. The foundations of human effort or wisdom or celebrity are no saving foundation at all.

Where's your faith today? It seems too often that we run across people who have built their faith on a parent's faith or a youth pastor or a relationship or a church or some religious experience in their past. Then life happens and faith built on these foundations doesn't last. Here's what we hear often, "I used to" or "My husband used to." "My dad used to." "My daughter used to." Wrong foundations lead to "used to" kind of faith.

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:11)

Jesus is the foundation of our faith in the sense that it is upon His person and work that our faith must rest. Since He is **unchangeable**, He is a foundation that never decays. Since He is **unmovable**, He is a foundation that never shakes. Since He is **Truth**, He is a foundation that never cracks. Since He is **love**, He is a foundation that is never uneven. Since He is **Lord**, He is a foundation that is never overwhelmed when the floods of life come. Why, when someone as glorious as Jesus offers Himself through the gospel as an unchangeable, unshakable, uncrackable foundation, would we build our hopes on some human leader or teacher?

Paul is begging us not to make a big deal about Paul or Apollos or anyone else. But the church can never make too big a deal about our Savior – Jesus' *person* as the Son of God and Son of Man and His *work* as our Substitute and Savior and His *triumph* over death and Satan and His *return* as King and Lord. Who's a big deal around here? Christ must be and there shouldn't be anyone else even close.

But is that the case here? Or for you in here [Pastor Steve points to his heart]? You might be one of the "used to" folks. You used to have something but its pretty much not there anymore. Might today's message not explain in some way why you are skeptical about Christianity? Does the thought of a better and safer and surer foundation for the salvation you long for peak your interest? If you will repent of the sins that hollow you out and have created a search for something more, if you will believe that Jesus was who He claimed to be and did what the Bible says He did in dying for our sins and resurrected to defeat death, your sins will be forgiven and your faith will have an unchangeable, unshakeable,

unmovable foundation. Christians, do you get the point? Let's make much of Him. Around here, He's the big deal and nobody else is even close!

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