

January 30, 2022
We're all in this together
1 Corinthians 4:1-7

"Bakers bake. Teachers teach. Pastors pastor. But what exactly is it that pastors do?" The word *"pastor"* literally means *"shepherd."* The early church uses the word to describe those who had a specific function in the church. However, exactly what pastors do – what it means to *"shepherd"* a church – is tricky to define. Shepherds are not part of our 2022 world, so none of us really knows who a shepherd is or what a shepherd does. Who are pastors, really? And how do we work together as pastors/congregation to be the people of Jesus? In particular, how can we figure this out so find hope, peace, love, and joy in 2022?

Where to start? (4:1)

Many people in Corinth didn't think much of Paul. They didn't want him as their pastor (1 Corinthians 3, last week). Paul talks more about this in 1 Corinthians 4. It's actually rather depressing. Paul calls them "worldly" (3:1-3) and "arrogant" (4:18-19).

We'll look at a few verses. He begins, *"So look at Apollos and me as mere **servants of Christ** who have been **put in charge** of explaining God's mysteries"* (4:1). He raises a tension with which all pastor wrestle: on the one hand pastors are *"servants of Christ,"* on the other hand we are *leaders* entrusted with (I hope) some education, wisdom, and abilities. Pastors/shepherds serve and care for their flock, but also help lead their congregation.

Some pastors trend to the leader/CEO/president/even-dictator side of things. They take their leadership position seriously. One Lutheran pastor told me of a German tradition of "Herr Pastor": when the pastor speaks, people jump. Some of these pastors are charismatic personalities; people love to follow them. But they may have no accountability. Tragically some of these gifted, strong, lone-wolf leaders have "fallen" in any number of ways.

Some pastors are all about servanthood. They will do everything for everyone. But they have little vision for leadership. Maybe they don't have a sense of direction. Or maybe official/unofficial power structures in their churches hog-tie any plan they propose. One of my colleagues jokes about a chair of his Board who defined his role as *"making sure the pastor doesn't get away with anything."* In frustration, they are servants, but not leaders.

Pastors struggle with the balance of being both a servant and a leader. Churches struggle to get it, too. It's a paradox. Some want the strong leader; others the passive servant. This model of servant leadership is different from leadership paradigms in government or business (like the CEO who recently fired 900 employees on a Zoom call). This is the model Jesus gives us. He certainly was a strong leader and an amazing teacher. He also gave Himself completely for His people, serving us in perfect love, to the point of death on the cross. This mystery of servant leadership makes the church completely different and unique.

What really matters? (4:2)

Some pastors evaluate their peers based on “butts” (attendance), budget, and baptisms. Some people in congregations evaluate pastors based on how they dress, sense of humour, charisma, how “successful” they are (how do you define “success”? In “church” terms it’s challenging). Paul says, *“A person who is put in charge must be faithful”* (4:2). Faithfulness, Paul says, is what really matters. What does faithfulness mean?

1. We are faithful **to Jesus** (as a servant *of Christ* [4:1]). As a pastor, I love Jesus, first and foremost. I am focussed on Jesus and the ministry of Jesus. I aim to build the Kingdom of God. Personally I try to live the way of Jesus (albeit imperfectly).
2. Faithfulness means commitment **to my church**. You are my flock, my family. I will give my best to you and for you. I will work with you not “at” you. I will try to be the best servant leader I can be so we, individually and as a church, can be all we can be.

Pastors are called to be faithful to God and their people. However, this is not just a “pastor-thing.” We are **ALL** called to be faithful **to Jesus**, and **our church family**. What about me? Do I love Jesus? Do I aim to serve Jesus? Am I trying to live the way of Jesus? Am I committed to my church family? Am I faithful to values like loving one another, caring for one another, forgiving one another, praying for one another (and all those “one anothers” we looked at)? Do we model the love of Jesus in our church? In our community? When we do, we do become people of hope, peace, love, and joy ...

When it comes to what matters, we need to be careful. It so easy to judge others. Paul goes on: *“As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don’t even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn’t prove I’m right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide”* (4:3-4).

Paul doesn’t pretend to be perfect. Some pastors do convey the impression they are *“holier than thou.”* One of the titles given to us is *“the Reverend.”* Once in a while I use it because people (particularly non-church people) recognize it. But it can imply that somehow a pastor is more “reverent” or “holy” than other people. That’s nonsense. Pastors are people too; people called to a particular task, but people like everyone else. None of us is perfect. The Church might be better off if more of us admitted that. But we are all called to holiness. When we are genuine, about our shortcomings and our goals, we are people of good news.

I appreciate the clear accountability Paul describes in these verses. He is not 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. He is accountable to **God**. That’s true for all of us, as well.

Back to the servant leadership metaphor. We know the pastor is a servant – **our** servant – so they should do what we tell them, right? This text challenges us to a broader vision. Yes, a pastor is called by a church. But the pastor is not primarily *“our servant”* but the *“servant of Christ”* (4:1); **Jesus is their Lord**, not the church. Pastors are ultimately accountable to

God. **Jesus is our Lord**, too. All of us are ultimately accountable to Him, as well.

Jesus is our Lord: as a church we ask ourselves, how can we help our pastors be the most faithful servants of Jesus they can be to help us? Jesus is our Lord: how can we all be faithful to Him and faithful to love and serve one another, to be who Jesus calls us to be? When we are that kind of people, we bring hope, peace, love, and joy to the world.

"So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due. Dear brothers and sisters, I have used Apollos and myself to illustrate what I've been saying. If you pay attention to what I have quoted from the Scriptures, you won't be proud of one of your leaders at the expense of another. For what gives you the right to make such a judgment? What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift?" (4:5-7).

Paul goes on to warn the Corinthians about being judgmental. People boasted about how much wiser they were than silly old Paul. They were criticizing Paul and Apollos, based on their own expectations and rules, not by Scriptural standards. Paul says, *"You are too worldly"* (3:1-3). Their self-righteous judgmental-ness comes across as arrogant and ugly (4:18-19). Judgmental-ness inevitably comes across as prideful, unloving, and unwelcoming.

Judgmental-ness is a symptom of the Corinthians' immaturity. They THOUGHT they were so smart. But if they really knew God's Word, they'd know better. 1. They'd know Paul actually was being faithful and teaching Scripture. 2. They'd know Paul and his colleagues try to live God's way (as we all should). 3. They'd know it's not their prerogative to judge (Matthew 7:1-5). Judgment is God's job. It's **only** God's job. Scripture teaches what matters is character and faithfulness. Faithfulness to God and faithfulness to God's people.

In the Baptist tradition, we emphasize that individuals relate directly to God (without need of a priest) and understand Scripture (without need of official interpretations). But we can take this too far. I could excuse strange beliefs or behaviours, even ones contrary to Scripture, because God told **me** they're ok. Paul emphasizes there is an absolute standard for all of our beliefs, ethics, and behaviour. That standard is God and His Word. We all need to read Scripture, wrestle with God's Word, and apply it diligently to our lives. It's easier to say, "Author so-and-so says ..." or "God-is-telling-me ..." But that's not good enough. We all need to keep reading Scripture, learning, growing, praying, and living more like Jesus. **Jesus is our Lord**, not the pastor, some media influencer, author, church Board, or dream.

I can honestly say my experience at First B has been overwhelmingly positive. I have not felt a lot of judgment. People ask, how can we help our pastors be the best they can be? How can we help you be the most faithful servants of Christ you can be, so you can help us be faithful servants, too? Thank you. Please, keep on praying for us. It is only through the power of God that any of us can make a difference in Christian ministry. Keep on encouraging us. You would never believe the power of one small, sincere complement.

Above all, join with us in praying, talking, and dreaming about who can be as a church.

We're all in this together

When I was working on my Ph.D. thesis, I talked with pastors about how they saw their role. I asked them to complete the phrase, "Pastor as _____." When I suggested "shepherd" one person was blunt – "No, not a shepherd. I was a missionary in rural Mexico and I know sheep. Sheep are smelly, ugly, and stupid. I don't want to think of my people as smelly, ugly, and stupid." Among the answers I got were "Pastor as octopus," "Pastor as midwife," and, one cynic's "captain of the Titanic." A fascinating variety and total lack of consensus.

What we can agree on is we, pastors, cannot do it alone. Being a do-it-all-yourself octopus doesn't work. Jesus didn't work alone. He gathered around Himself others who worked with Him. So did Paul. Paul is always serving with others.

Similarly, we as pastors are part of a team of ministers. I do NOT mean, a team of "formal" pastors (though we have a great one of those). I mean a team of "ministers." The English word "minister" is Latin for "servant." It's used in Scripture to refer to ALL of us, as God's people. As we'll see in 1 Corinthians 12, we are ALL "ministers" – ALL servants of Jesus. We all serve one another – loving, caring for, praying for, forgiving, supporting, and encouraging one another. We are all colleagues in building this enterprise called "God's church." These are all too important to leave to "pastors" (though we do them, too).

As pastors, we are servant leaders who use our gifts to teach, care, encourage, administrate, preach – using whatever gifts we have. God calls each pastor to use their gifts faithfully. No pastor has all gifts. No pastor (or team of pastors) can do it all. We can't lead every group, make every phone call, talk to every hurting friend, fix every leaky tap, or teach every class. We're simply not good at everything. And we don't have time for everything, We rely on all of us using our gifts: to serve and help, teach, encourage, give generously, lead, fix plumbing, care, discern, decorate, share wisdom, pray, and so much more, too.

Every church, as a whole, has all the gifts among its members it needs to be faithful and obedient to God's calling. God's desire is, as a church, we ALL use the gifts we have. We, as pastors, are called to be servant leaders – to use our gifts faithfully.

For God's church to thrive, we ALL use our talents, time, abilities, experiences, skills, together to serve Jesus, to serve one another and our community. Your ministry – your service – is just as important as mine or anyone else's. You have gifts, talents, experiences, skills, education, and abilities I don't have. You connect with people I will never connect with. You matter. As a church, we can only be all God can have us be, when we're all in this together. And when we do that, we are the hope, peace, love, and joy our world desperately needs.

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