

Temples, Quarrels and Book Clubs
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Mark Archibald

Behind my desk in my office you will find a bookshelf. On that bookshelf are some family photos, some sports memorabilia, and a whole lot of books.

If you are a book in my library, you are there for one of two reasons:

1. I've never read you before. I bought you with good intentions – I just haven't gotten to you yet. (Don't worry – your day will come)
2. I've read you before and I really, really like you. I'll use you again as a resource, or may even read you again from start to finish.

If I'm done completely with a book, it ends up with someone else, in the church library or at Value Village.

Within the last two years, a few books from my library took a different route. These books went from my library . . . straight into the recycling bin. Then went off to be shredded, recycled and maybe one day made into better books. Or maybe one day made into recycled into toilet paper. Either way, they would end up in a better format than the one they were currently in.

One book I almost gleefully put in the recycling bin. I never quite understood the hype around this author, and was rather happy to get him off my shelf. I enjoyed recycling that book just a little too much.

The other books I very sadly put in the recycling bin. I really enjoyed this teacher and gained much from their work. They influenced me immensely, and taught me Scripture in helpful ways. I liked this author's books, but I knew they had to go.

Before you say this is "aNoThEr CaSe oF cAnCeL cUITuRe", both author/teachers did things that significantly undermined their own work. One always over-exaggerated their credentials to pose as a mighty academic teacher, thinker and author. The other wrote fantastic things about living in Christian community, while using the same Christian community to manipulate others into sex.

Neither was simply a case of a good teacher doing something bad – this was teachers doing something bad against the very things they were teaching. Sometimes even using their work and teaching to hide in plain sight as sexual predators.

So as a result, their work that was on my bookshelf went in the recycling bin.

So when I look on my bookshelf, I'm a bit haunted. Are all the Christian leaders and teachers and thinkers in my library people worth following?

And why am I so often taken in by Christian leaders and teachers that actually have very little connection to Jesus?

I'm sure we all have Christian leaders who influence us immensely. There are a lot of us on staff or in the church that are greatly influenced by other Christians. If I was to mention the name of someone in our church, you might immediately be able to mention the well-known Christian leader or author who influences them the most. (Maybe that's an activity we should add if we ever go back to print bulletins again – "match the First B person with the Christian leader they talk about the most".) These are good influences! Whether you find them on YouTube or Twitter or your local bookstore, these are Christian leaders that have helped us know and follow Jesus.

But when do we go too far with this? Is there a place where we stop following Jesus and instead find ourselves following someone else that wasn't worth our attention in the first place?

Paul gives us a helpful framework for all of this in 1 Corinthians 3.

The church in Corinth was obsessed with their Bible teachers. They did this to the point of jealousy and quarrelling. One person would say "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos." It wasn't so much about who their influences were. It was that they were listening to one teacher to the exclusion of the other.

I know I do that. Some of you read or listen to teachers that I have entirely dismissed. The problem's not with the authors you read (usually) – but my personal response to them. Maybe there's something specific about their Bible teaching or theology that I don't like. Maybe it's what I know of their personality. But instead of listening and just recognizing I have some issues with the teacher, I dismiss them entirely. And I think that Paul would say to me, "that's not a good idea." Actually he would tell me something much harsher than that. He would say,

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit, but as people who are still worldly. (1 Corinthians 3:1)

Paul's word for people that obsessed about who they follow and do not follow as their Christian leaders: **WORLDLY**. Who grew up hearing the word "worldly" in Christian circles? I did. I heard the word "worldly" a lot! The "worldly" things I heard about were going to the movie theatre on Sunday (if at all) or listening to music not made by Bill and Gloria Gaither. Worldly was about the influences you let into your life.

But here, Paul's take on "worldly" is giving your full allegiance to a specific Bible teacher while rejecting others. Paul says,

For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. (1 Corinthians 3:4-5)

The allegiance the Corinthians claimed concerning Christian leaders and thinkers – worldly!

The dismissal the Corinthians had of other teachers that were not their favourite – worldly!

The end result was quarrelling and division and a focus on unimportant things.

Paul points out that your Bible teachers aren't the point anyway. The foundation of the Bible teachers is the most important thing.

For we [the teachers] are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:9-11)

If Jesus is the foundation – it's a foundation that's unshakable and unbreakable. Not the teachers. Not their teaching. Not their ministry. That's not the unbreakable, going-to-last-forever part. Christ alone is what lasts.

If the foundation is Jesus, there's a lot that can be built on that foundation. Paul says the foundation is set as Jesus, and that is what we are built on.

Paul then goes on to say that not all of what is built on Jesus will last.

If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light.

It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work.

If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.

If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

The people whose books I recycled? I think their work was exposed to the light and found to be lacking. When the cow dust hit the combine rotor, their work, their books, their teaching did not hold up. It is all going to be tested, from the podcasts we listen to, to the books we read, to the songs we sing, to the sermon you are hearing this morning – it's yet to be seen how it will all hold up.

As we see more and more Christian leaders of high profile discredited, very little of this is anything to do with cancel culture. MOST of this is their work and influence being "revealed with fire" and battle tested. Their work is exposed, and our faith that is more built on their teaching than Christ as our foundation is exposed along with it.

From the mega-church to the local church, from the podcast to the pulpit, it is all going to be tested. Some of it will endure. Some of it won't. But what has always endured and will always endure is the foundation: Jesus Christ.

So in the meantime, what do we do? A place I learn and grow the most in my own faith is in a book. I have a lot of teachers and speakers and authors that have spoken into my life. Stuff that really sticks and I live out is stuff on my bookshelf.

The next time a speaker is announced for an upcoming conference, do I yell “who cares!” in response? I admit this would be a lot of fun and rather impish, but it really doesn’t accomplish much.

How do we let leaders teach us without getting drawn into their charisma?

Be aware of your own allegiance. Am I following someone because they are making a big deal of Jesus, their foundation? Or am I following them because of their charisma and the way they make me feel? Am I deepening faith in Jesus, or joining a cult of personality?

Widen who influences you. Am I learning from other teachers whose faith experience and cultural background is just like my own? Or am I listening to teachers of different countries, cultures, experiences, theologies and perspectives that are all building on the foundation of Jesus Christ? Am I ignoring and dismissing teachers that actually say something that I need to hear?

We have been taught to think that to live correctly as a Christian we need to narrow the influence of other teachers in our lives. After, all “narrow is the way that leads to life and wide is the path that leads to destruction.” But when it comes to learning about Jesus and learning to live my faith, narrowing my influences does not help me live in the good narrow way. If I commit myself to a handful of Bible teachers, I am far more likely to be suckered into something unhealthy than if I listen to a lot of points of view – points of view of people whose foundation is Jesus. When it comes to learning, who I let in is far more important than who I keep out. We think that narrowing who we listen to helps us become better followers of Jesus, but the opposite may actually be true! Widen who influences you.

Know that we are all building on the same foundation. If we are truly building on the foundation of Jesus, this means we ought to be listening to one another as well. Maybe I ask someone that I know about the books they are reading, and read those books, too – even if I’m not fully on board with that author’s theology. But even more, I can learn directly from you. Every week I encounter people in our church and city that teach me something that I need to be taught. Every week I have examples of people lived out before me that put me to shame with their wisdom, kindness and the way they love their neighbour.

We elevate the famous Christians and submit to their way of thinking and teaching. But the ones we ought to listen to more than them are the Christians we encounter every day. It takes more time and attention to listen to those around you. But it is worth it in our growth as the followers of Jesus together.

The early church was encouraged to submit to one another. They weren’t told submit to Paul, or Apollos or Peter. They were told to submit to one another. If I ever think I am too advanced to learn about Jesus from YOU, there is something very wrong with ME. Paul would tell me: **Brothers, I cannot address you as someone who lives by the Spirit, but someone who is worldly.**

Our world is increasingly polarized. Somehow we think that the solution to this is to become more polarized and narrow the people and perspectives we listen to. But it’s not the solution. That is a truly hopeless path.

Imagine, just imagine, that the cure to this polarization is to actually listen to and learn from the people we disagree with. What a message of grace this would be to the world. “We disagree on many things, but we share the same foundation – Jesus. Because of this we learn from one another, and we have learned to be Jesus’ disciples.”

My foundation is Jesus. Our foundation is Jesus. Who shares this same foundation with us that we ought to be listening to?