

Example & Authority

1Cor 4.9-21

PRAYER

Although we're looking at 1st Corinthians chapter 4 today, I'd like to begin with a passage from the Book of Hebrews. Chapter 4 is about **who** we listen to for our spiritual guidance, and what *qualifications* we should look for in those who lead us. Hebrews gives us a very brief answer that may help us understand chapter 4.

^{NKJ} **Heb 13:17** – Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

If we cannot submit to a man who has our best interests at heart, how can we hope to submit to Christ who *appointed* him, and who *placed* us in that man's care, and who *entrusted* us to him along with all the things of Christ? Our natural inclination is to say, "Yes, but whatever man he is, he's JUST a man. He's a *sinner*, just like me. So my opinion and my understanding are just as good as his. I will pick my own teachers. I will choose what and who to obey, and what and who not to obey, *leaning on my own understanding*. For I too have the Spirit of Christ."

And Jesus seems to affirm that position. He said, ⁸ "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ "Do not call *anyone* on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ "Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, *that is*, Christ. (Mat 23:8-10 ^{NAU}).

And yet the writer of Hebrews, inspired by God, says to us,

Obey those who rule over you [i.e. your leaders], and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. LET THEM do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Heb 13:17 ^{NKJ})

A primary rule of interpretation is that the Bible does not contradict itself. And yet here we **seem** to have a contradiction. How can we teach without teachers? How can we lead without leaders? And why should you submit to someone who isn't *over you*? The key may be found in this Hebrews verse. Most translations have "Obey your **leaders**." The NKJ says, "Obey those who rule over you." There really isn't much difference. *Leaders rule*. But the word for leaders is NOT a **noun**. It isn't a position or a title. It's a **verb**, an *activity* – it's something that leaders **do**.

The verb is hayge'omahee. We get our English word hegemony from it. The English word simply means to rule over someone else. But the Greek word means to **think**, to **consider**, to **keep in mind** – to **account** for something.

And so, when the writer of Hebrews says that these men must give an account, he's affirming that LEADERS are those who think through the consequences; they consider how best to care for those who have been entrusted to them. They are **responsible** because they know they will be **held accountable** for their actions. The verse could be worded, "Obey those who have YOU in mind when they make decisions, who consider YOUR best interests when they lead, who think about YOU so they can properly **love** and **care** for you."

Please open your bibles to 1 Corinthians, chapter 4, verses 9-21. I'll be reading from the Holman Christian Standard Bible – for *no* particular reason at all...

Verse 9: For I think God has displayed us, the apostles, in last place, like men condemned to die: we have become a spectacle to the world, and to angels, and to men.

Paul does what every good Bible teacher should do: he takes his students **to the cross**. Wait. Maybe you don't see the cross here, but it *is* – *it's between the lines*. You have to know that it was the practice of the Romans to give a parade for their victors. At the end of the parade, in last place, marched those who were captured and condemned to death. Paul is saying that the elders are like those prisoners who are placed at the end of the parade, in last place, ready to die. *He knows that elders are in good company*. After **Jesus Christ** was tortured, and tried, and convicted, the self-proclaimed victors held a parade in celebration. They marched at the head of the procession to Calvary, with Jesus carrying his cross behind.

Jesus was condemned to death by God, and crucified by men, to atone for our sins. He ascended to God to give an account for us, to take responsibility for us at the Judgement Throne, because God entrusted us to him. Jesus is our Leader, our Master, our Teacher, our Friend, and our Brother. **We submit to him as to one who must give an account for our souls. We want him to do that with joy and not with grief – for that would not be profitable for us.** And Paul, like every elder in God's household, represents Christ; he's an emissary doing the **work** of Christ, in Christ's **way**, and in Christ's **name**. He's a **servant** AND he's a **steward** as we saw last time. Paul explains to the Corinthians that being a leader means learning to sacrifice yourself for others.

Remember from last time that the language in this chapter is **ironic**, *not* **sarcastic**. Irony is when what is being said or described doesn't match the expected reality – it's contradictory. *It's ironic to say* "Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink." But it's *sarcastic* to say, "Marry me and I'll never look at another horse!" **Irony** highlights differences. **Sarcasm** ridicules. Here is Paul being *ironic*, because these Corinthians are jockeying for position with one another. They want to accrue glory for themselves, and to be exalted. Paul, on the other hand, knows that the last shall be first, and that those who would be first must be servant of all. And so he describes for them what it is like to be an *elder*, an *evangelist*, a *servant* of Christ – and how **different** the reality is from what they *think* it is, and from what they *value*. The reality is that it will **COST** them to follow Christ, because the road they travel will *shape them* into the image of Christ. Paul lays it out for them ironically:

Verse 10: We are **fools** for Christ, but you are **wise** in Christ! We are **weak**, but you are **strong**! You are **dis-tinguished**, but we are **dis-honored**! [That's irony] ¹¹ Up to the present hour we are both hungry and thirsty; we are poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless; ¹² we labor, working with our own hands. When we are **reviled**, we **bless**; when we are **persecuted**, we **endure** it; ¹³ when we are **slandered**, we **entreat**. [That's irony again] We are, even now, like the world's garbage, like the filth of all things [or the *scum of the earth*]. ¹⁴ **I'm not writing this to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children.**

Paul's words are NOT filled with the anger of sarcasm, but with the love of one who **considers**, and **keeps in mind** those whom Christ has entrusted to him – that's what leaders do. He is letting them know the difference between an elder, and a *disinterested* instructor. He and the other elders are **sacrificing** themselves, while the Corinthians are pursuing comfort. What can he say to encourage them to choose sacrifice over comfort as they serve Christ? How can he convince them to listen to their elders instead of listening to strangers, or even to one another – those who are NOT laying down their lives for them? Is it better for children to obey other children, than to obey their parents? Paul is their **leader**, not a **stranger**. He is their **father**, not a **hireling**. Listen to how Christ described **his** role as a shepherd:

(Joh 10:12-15 CSB) The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and doesn't own the sheep, leaves them and runs away when he sees a wolf coming. The wolf then snatches and scatters them. ¹³ *This happens* because he is a **hired** man and doesn't care about the sheep. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd. I know My own sheep, and they know Me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows Me, and I know the Father. **I lay down My LIFE for the sheep.**

Isn't that what Paul has been describing to them? Paul is saying that he cares for them in a *fatherly* way, not as an *employee*. He serves at the pleasure of Christ who owns them both. And because *he* loves *Christ*, and *Christ* loves *them*, Paul also loves them. As a good steward, he acts in Christ's name to protect the servants of his Master, *even if he has to lay down his life for them*, as Christ did. "As Christ is, so are we in this world." (1Jo 4.17)

1Cor 4, verse 15 For you can have 10,000 instructors [or hired tutors] in Christ, but you **cannot** have many fathers.

In case they missed it, Paul emphasizes that he's not playing the role of a tutor, of someone who has been hired to teach for a wage. Rather he is acting as the manager of the house, someone who has been given the responsibility to care for them – but far beyond that, *he loves them as a father loves his children*.

Now I have *fathered* you in Christ Jesus *through the gospel*.¹⁶ Therefore I urge you, **be imitators of me**.

He isn't saying, "You owe me because I SAVED YOU." We know from chapter 1, verse 14 that Paul didn't baptize all of them. And he probably didn't lead them all to Christ. But nonetheless he has *fathered* them, PARENTED them, NURTURED them. And having fathered them through the Gospel by his preaching, *he is now responsible for them*. *By teaching them, and setting them an example, he is acting in a fatherly role*.

Now, if all of Paul's actions are intended for their benefit, because he treats them as his children, then surely they will follow *him* as he follows *Christ*. It is his responsibility to imitate Christ so they have a good example – and hopefully they will WANT to *imitate* him. Every father feels that burden to set a good example for his children. *Jesus set an example for his disciples when he washed their feet*. And having set them an example, he asked the disciples to *imitate* him,

^{ESV} **John 13:14** If I then, **your Lord and Teacher**, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

Washing feet, as it is used throughout Scripture, is the sign of being a servant. It is done to give rest and comfort to another. **Paul** has imitated **Christ** in his care for them – they were given rest and comfort while Paul bore their burden. He therefore urges **them** to imitate **him**, but NOT out of guilt or obligation. There are limits and

standards when following someone else who is giving us a visible representation of Christ. The writer of Hebrews explains who and what to imitate:

Heb 13:7 Remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you. **As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith.** (CSB)

We are obligated to carefully observe how our elders conduct themselves. **OK. But Paul's not there.** How are they supposed to observe the outcome of his life and imitate his faith? How are they supposed to move off the milk and onto the meat of obedience if they can't see what obedience looks like *in action*, and in the *context* of their Corinthian life? Paul has a solution for them.

1Cor 4, VERSE 17 This is why I have sent to you Timothy, who is my **beloved and faithful child in the Lord** [or my beloved child, and *faithful in the Lord*]. He will remind you about my ways in Christ Jesus, just as I teach everywhere, in every church.

Timothy is a second-generation Christian, raised in the faith. *He has become an imitator of Paul* – he knows Paul's ways, *which are the ways of Christ*. It is a consistent way of life, instructed and practiced in ALL churches EVERYWHERE. It is a universal standard to which all subscribe. It is a form of discipleship that everyone submits to under the tutelage of those who have gone before them. *But there is resistance at Corinth*. There is second-guessing. They are judging for themselves whether what is being taught is acceptable to them, by THEIR OWN standards. They are speaking out, trying to get others to see things their way, as if Paul was never coming back – as if their own words and actions would have no consequences for *them* or for *others* in the church. They are creating *divisions*.

VERSE 18 Now some are *inflated with pride*, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will know not the TALK but the POWER of those who are inflated with pride. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God is not in TALK but in POWER. ²¹ What do you want? Should I come to you with a ROD, or in LOVE and a spirit of GENTLENESS? (1Co 4:9 CSB)

Paul gives them a CHOICE. He's not threatening them. He's quietly and gently telling them that *words have no meaning if they are not backed by action*. Will they willingly accept Paul and their elders as those who should be listened to, or will they run after those with fanciful stories, who say what they want to hear? Remember what I said earlier: Our natural inclination is to say, "Yes, but whatever

man he is, he's JUST a man. He's a *sinner*, just like me. So my opinion and my understanding are just as good as his..."

What Paul does is to give them an **objective standard** to use when choosing who to follow and who to imitate. He's saying, "***Choose your teachers by their way of life.*** Are they puffed up with pride and empty words? Or does their way of life evidence the POWER of the Spirit at work in them?" Look at the *outcome*.

Paul is a *living example* of Christ. **Apollos** is a *living example* of Christ. **Peter** is a *living example* of Christ. What about these others whose ideas are so *provocative* and so *interesting*, so *debatable* and so *argumentative*? What example have THEY set for you? What do you see of THEIR life lived out before you? Are they paying lip-service by offering **words** instead of offering **themselves**, as living sacrifices?

(Isa 29:13-14, *literal trans.*) And so the Lord says, "These people SAY they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their HEARTS are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing, an instruction of a man, even an instructor. ¹⁴ Because of this, I will compound the change to this people with even more change: I will destroy the wisdom of the 'wise,' and I will bury the insights of the 'witty'."

There are those who like to talk a good game, but really don't display the truth of God in an *exemplary* life. They like to pick a fight as their way of evangelizing or starting a conversation. They say something controversial, something that's sure to get a rise out of somebody. Or they lecture with a bull-horn instead of enticing with honey. They don't want a two-way dialogue because they don't have the best interests of the other person in mind. They try to *drive* people to the feet of Christ instead of *leading* them there. Their conversations sound more like lectures than dialogues – they're one-way. They say, "I think this. What do YOU think?" They don't ask *questions*. They make *statements*. They set it up like a **test**, with right or wrong answers, pass or fail results – and then they don't understand why nobody wants to talk to them, or why they constantly argue with others.

We do that to our children at home. We do it to our students in the classroom. We do it to our spouses over the dinner table. We do it at church picnics and camp-outs. ***We don't accept the responsibility for the content of our speech and its impact on others.*** And so we don't really care if we set a bad example or not. Or maybe we deflect responsibility by quoting somebody else, as if it's not US that started the argument – it's some stranger who's not in the room. We think if we do *that*, then there won't be any personal responsibility for what we've said – for the thing that created the division, the jealousy, and the strife that followed.

Why do I bring this up? Because in the church at Corinth, and even in our own church *here*, there are some who are teaching us without taking personal responsibility for their teachings, who don't *have us in mind* when they speak. Some of them have never even met us – they are like absentee landlords. They enter local churches by sending out books and tapes by the Internet or by mail. They don't contact the elders of the local church to ask for permission before they teach. They don't consider whether their teachings contradict what the elders are teaching. They draw followers after themselves. They may undermine the unity of the body and the consistency of the teaching. They may bleed off the limited energies and resources of the local church. They may cause confusion and division without *realizing it*. **And yet they have the best of intentions**. They provide *really good tools*! These outside teachers are grouped under the name “parachurch.”

They're NOT **evil or malicious**. They're helping local elders by teaching things the elders may not have time to teach. But consider that these folks don't have any responsibilities beyond teaching this specialized knowledge. **They aren't directly responsible for the growth of believers in the local churches**. They aren't accountable TO them or FOR them. **They don't oversee them**. They simply provide information, *tools*. Yet, in establishing their ministries, they gather to themselves an assembly of followers: a “church.” They may become a **substitute church** for some believers, holding a one-way conversation with them. But they are accountable only for the *materials* they distribute, not the people. The local church may empty as the parachurch grows. Again, these ministries don't *intend* to do that; but that's what happened anyway. Their defense has been, “If the local churches were doing their job, they wouldn't need us.” **And that's exactly right**.

But the solution isn't to shift teaching to outside parachurch organizations. Their leaders and teachers CANNOT be models for our congregations. They CANNOT be mentors for new believers. They CANNOT be fathers to our spiritual children. The solution is for local churches to get back to having local elders set a Christlike example that others WANT to imitate – face to face. The solution is to have local elders speak into the lives of their people because they are INVITED to speak into their lives – because they *know* and *trust* one another. The parachurches, by contrast, are like those **10,000 instructors** that Paul decried: those who don't know you, or care for you – they don't know where you are in your walk, or what you're going through in your life. They are **hirelings** who don't care about the sheep except in a general way. To them you are *customers*, even though they may **call you partners**.

Maybe you're thinking, "Hey, we're all adults here. We can make up our own minds. We don't need a baby-sitter. What harm could possibly come from speaking our own mind on things, or from seeking outside advice and counsel? What harm could come from taking straw polls to see how many people in the congregation think like we do, and might take sides with us?"

Well, THAT is *exactly* what was going on at Corinth! They spoke their minds, and sought the counsel of others, and talked about their favorite area of controversy, not realizing how *destructive* and *ill-considered* that was. So Paul is asking them to consider their WAYS, and to consider WHO they are listening to...

There's nothing wrong with parachurch organizations *per se*, or with reading books written by folks who don't attend our church, or with listening to radio and TV programs that may have slightly different doctrines than we do, or debating among ourselves. *Healthy debate is a good thing when it helps us sharpen our swords*. The noble Bereans examined the Word of God *daily* to see if what Paul said was true. **HE was an outside teacher**; so they didn't just *accept* his teaching; they *verified* it (Ac 17.11). But when you follow outside teachers in place of and in opposition to your local elders, it's *divisive*. Let the elders instruct you in what God's Word has to say about the matter. When you accept outside teachers as your authority in place of and in opposition to your local elders, it's *divisive*. Let the elders show you what dangers may lie ahead for you. *Please, don't confuse TOOLS with authority*.

If you bypass the ones God placed over you, and you disregard them in favor of another, then you're walking on thin ice as far as your own welfare goes. It is not *profitable* for you to do that, says the writer of Hebrews. Why? *Because Paul says those others are not personally responsible for you; and you may not be able to observe their lives to know whether you should imitate them. Your elders are, or at least should be, accessible to you*. You should be *calling on them* for wise counsel, *questioning them* about their teaching, and *comparing* it to God's Word.

Don't submit to and obey your elders just because they're your elders. Do it because you **know** they are striving to be imitators of Christ. Do it because you know they rightly divide God's Word and strive to live accordingly – just as YOU are striving to do. You are on the *same journey* with them, *sharing the road with them*. Why wouldn't you talk to them on the way so you can learn from one another, and love one another, and challenge one another, *in the name of Christ*? *Even elders follow other elders, as they follow Christ!* That's the example they set for you. It would be profitable for *you* to do that; so I urge you to *imitate* them.

God gives the church its elders and teachers to lead us. **But** why should we submit to them? Who qualified them to lead? And where does their authority come from?

Well, **these** are the knotty questions we've been looking at today. Those who lead must be **qualified** to lead. But the *qualifications* for elder have *little* to do with their giftings; their *qualifications* have *everything* to do with their **character**. That's what Paul is saying here. He's **not** objecting to other teachers, just as the Bereans didn't object to *him*. He's asking about their **character**, about whether they are all mouth and no action. He asks if these other teachers are taking responsibility for the believers at Corinth, in the same way that HE has taken responsibility for them, as their FATHER, serving them *sacrificially*.

Let me repeat that quote from the writer of Hebrews one more time: [Heb. 13:7](#) Remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you. **As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith.** (CSB) It's *voluntary*.

An elder's only authority is the example he sets: ***the life he lives in imitation of Christ***, imperfect though that may be. Later on Paul writes, "[Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. \(1Co 11:1^{ESV}\)](#) That's both an ***exhortation***, and a ***caution***. Be careful who you imitate, and who you listen to. *Know the Way of Christ as it is revealed in the Word of God. And then live it out together with your elders: the ones who KEEP YOU IN MIND as they live and teach among you. Invite them to speak into *your* life, as you carefully observe the outcome of *their* life, *their* faith.*

PRAYER