

## Study 6. 1 Cor 3:21-4:17

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‘It’s complicated, isn’t it? If only we could be less controlled by the opinions of others. Maybe a deserted island could be the answer. That would be a pricey way to avoid the judgments of others, but it might work. Apart from that option, you have a creepy sense that people are watching, judging, evaluating, accepting, or rejecting you. Sometimes the eyes belong to no one in particular. Other times you know exactly who or what group you are trying to please. Either way, you are controlled by other people more than you think, and other people, of course, are controlled by how you see them.’

- Ed Welch, What do you think of me? And why do I care?

Churches are often regarded as places of judgement and condemnation. Even church members sometimes describe feeling like they need to be perfect and cannot be honest about their real struggles. It’s all about image.

- Have you ever felt judged in church? Can you share with us about the experience?
- How did it make you feel?

### Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

In this section Paul summarises his preceding teaching as ‘no more boasting about human leaders.’ Historically, over-identifying with leaders has been more associated with the Pentecostal tradition than mainstream Protestantism.

- What do you think are the corresponding dangers for an Anglican (or Baptist, or Presbyterian etc.) church like Barneys?
- Paul seems to think that the best antidote to boasting about leaders and breaking into factions around them is the gospel news that ‘All things are yours...and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God’ (vv.21, 23). How does believing this change things?

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

Here Paul, having told the Corinthians how they ought not to regard their leaders, describes how they should regard them.

- How does Paul say the Corinthians should view their leaders?
- What difference would this make to how they relate to them?
- What difference would this make the how their leaders experience their own ministry?

Ciampa and Rosner write:

'The Corinthians wanted to be judged as wise in society's eyes, and to judge their leaders, only some of whom they deemed worthy of praise, by the same worldly standard. Paul's response is to assert the singular prerogative of God to judge and to bestow praise.' (Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary)

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-4:2

From 3:5-4:2, leaders in the church are described in 4 ways: servants (3:5); fellow workers (3:9); subordinates or assistants (4:1); and managers (4:1-2).

- What aspects of Christian ministry do each of these bring out?

An ancient document records the commissioning of a manager by his master:

"I have empowered you by this document to administer my estate in Arsinoe, and to collect the rents and, if need be, to arrange new leases or to cultivate some land yourself, and to give receipts in my name, and to transact any business connected with stewardship, just as I can transact it when I am present, and to distribute the plots in Karamis, restoring to me what remains over, as to which matter I rely on your good faith, and I confirm whatever you decide about them."

The Corinthians were assessing their leaders on the criteria of wisdom, eloquence and impressive person presence. God's basis for judgement, however, is that 'those who have been given a trust must prove faithful' (4:1-2).

- On what basis do we judge our leaders? What does faithfulness look like (4:8-13)?

We all judge our leaders and even one another. However, Paul says that, in the end, it is only the judgement of the Lord that counts (4:4-5). This isn't because he is a stoic - Paul has known and been hurt by judgement, even amongst those he led to Christ.

- What is the implication of this for the church (4:5)? What might this look like?

In the first 3 chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul has highlighted six quotes from Scripture (1:19, 31; 2:9, 16; 3:19, 20) whose cumulative application is the same: 'no boasting about human beings.' In 4:6 he hammers this again: 'do not go beyond what is written!' The danger of disobedience, Paul says, is

that they will become 'puffed up' (4:6; compare 4:8-13), and Paul writes to warn them against this (4:14).

- What is the danger of being 'puffed up' and why is it such a threat to the Christian life?

### **Application / Implications**

- What barriers do you experience to living in the light of the Lord's judgement, and none other? Why do you think you find them substantial?
- It is often true that we feel judged by the standards by which we judge others. This is sometimes called 'projection'. Certainly, the Pharisees felt most condemned by Jesus Christ. Is there a difference between how you judge your leaders and how you want to be judged yourself? What is it?
- What can you do to see your leaders - and yourself - differently, in the light of this passage?