

# THE TRUE MINISTER

by Ray C. Stedman

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We will be looking at the first seven verses of First Corinthians 4 this morning, the passage that defines for us the true view of a minister of Christ. There are many stereotypes abroad today as to what a minister is. It would be interesting to me to know what flashed through your mind when I said those words, "a minister of Christ."

One view of a minister that is widely accepted as a stereotype today is that he is a producer of "hot air," a gas bag, saying things that have no real significance. I heard a definition of a minister as "a holy groan in a black suit." (You have seen that stereotype: "My dear friends, we are gathered here on this solemn occasion to worship God." I hope that idea is rapidly disappearing -- I pray that God will speed it on its way.)

I read another definition that a minister is "a mild-mannered man standing before mild-mannered people, and exhorting them to be more mild mannered." What an exciting concept of a Christian leader!

Well, these Corinthians to whom the Apostle Paul was writing thought of ministers of Christ as big shot traveling preachers who had their partisans in every church, and who were known for their knowledge or their eloquence. As we have already seen many times, they were dividing up in the church at Corinth and some were saying, "I am of Paul; I am of Apollos; I am of Cephas." Thus they were breaking the congregation into quarreling factions that gathered around men.

Paul has pointed out at great length the danger, the weakness and the wrongness of that position, and now, in Chapter 4, he corrects it by setting before us the true view.

**This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy [or faithful]. {1 Cor 4:1-2 RSV}**

That verse describes the responsibilities of ministers. In Verses 3 through 5 Paul is going to give us the proper evaluation of ministers, and in Verses 6 and 7 the freedom which they are to exercise when the congregation sees them in the proper light. (I give you those divisions so that if you drowse off while I am preaching you will know where to pick it up.)

When I use the term "minister of Christ," I am not speaking of the traditional concept of a full-time employee of a church who is kept around to do the preaching, the teaching, the counseling and to run the mimeograph machine. Unfortunately that is a widespread concept of what the pastor ought to be and I run into it in many places.

This concept, of course, is totally unknown in the New Testament. The idea of having a single pastor, *the* pastor, is an unbiblical imposition that has come into the church within the past 250 years. A minister of Christ in the New Testament churches was anyone, anyone, who by virtue of a gift of the Spirit was a preacher or a teacher of the Word of God. That is what Paul is talking about here.

There is a sense in which we are all ministers of Christ. Every Christian is in the ministry -- I have said that many times. But there is a special sense -- Paul is dealing with it here -- of those who have the gift of teaching or preaching ("prophesying" as it is called in Scripture), and their function within the body of Christ. There are dozens of ministers like that in every church. In fact, here at PBC, since we have stressed some of these things for a long time, there are probably scores, if not hundreds, of people who fulfill the qualifications and the characterization of ministers of Christ as Paul is speaking of them in this particular passage.

Well, how are we to look at people like that, and what are we to think about them? Paul deals with this first.

Who are these people? Should we call them bishops? Are they wardens, as the Episcopalians call them? Are

they doctors, rabbis, popes or even senior pastors?

Well, you do not find those titles in the Scriptures. (Bishops are referred to, but not in the usual sense that we think of them today. Bishops were not in oversight over more than one church. They were the equivalent of elders and overseers.)

The word the apostle uses here is a very remarkable one. He says, "We want you to look at us as servants of Christ." The word for servant is the Greek word *huperetes*, which literally means "an under-rower."

Now everyone in Corinth understood what that word meant. Corinth was where the war galleys of the Roman Empire crossed through the isthmus that separated the Ionian Sea from the Aegean Sea, and the Corinthians knew that the lowest deck of a war galley was made of single rows of benches on both sides of the ship where the rowers sat. Then on a little deck raised up above them all, so that each rower could see him, was the captain of the ship. It was the rowers' task to row according to what he said. If he wanted the ship to move then they were to row; if he wanted them to stop they had to stop instantly. Their whole business was to obey his orders. Now, that is the word that Paul chooses to describe those who are teachers, preachers and ministers of the Word of God within the congregation of the Church. They are "under-rowers" of Christ.

This is a word that is used in other places in Scripture also. When our Lord stood before Pontius Pilate and Pilate asked him if he were a king, Jesus said, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants [*huperetes*] would fight," {cf, John 18:36 RSV}. That is, "If my kingdom were an earthly kingdom and I told my servants to fight that is what they would do. They would obey what I said."

This word is used again in the account of Paul and Barnabas as they go out on the first missionary journey. Luke tells us that they took with them a young man named John Mark to be their "minister" (*huperetes*). Did that mean that he was to be in charge of the devotions every morning? No, it meant that he was the one who got the airline tickets, checked their baggage, and made hotel reservations, ran the errands, and did what they told him.

Paul says, "That is what we want you to think about us. We are not big shots, we are not among you as domineering leaders with the last word to utter. We are servants of Christ, under-rowers with our eyes fixed on him. What he tells us to say that is what we are to say, and what he tells us not to do that is where our limits are. That is what we want you to think about us as you see us ministering among you.

From this flows what I think is a biblical independence of ministers of Christ, using that term in its widest sense. They are not to be servants of the Board, for the members of the Board themselves, the elders, are joint ministers of Christ with them. Ministers are not to be servants of the congregation, and least of all the denomination. They are servants of Christ. Paul says in Galatians, Chapter 1, "If I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ," {Gal 1:10 RSV}. There he draws a sharp contrast. They are not to be paying heed to what the congregation, or any one group within the congregation, wants to hear, but they are to say what the Lord tells them to say. That is what the servant of Christ, the under-rower of Christ, must do. I tell you I have never valued anything more in my whole life than the fact that I belong with that crowd. I see myself as an *huperetes*, an under-rower, of Christ, and it is my responsibility to say and do what he says and tells me to do.

A young pastor at a pastors' conference once said to me, "What would you do if you were in my shoes? My Board called me in and said to me, 'Look, there are some things we want you to understand. One is that this is our church; it is not your church. We were here before you came, and we are going to be here when you leave; therefore, we expect you to do what we want you to do and not what you think you ought to do.' What would you say to a church like that?"

I said, "Well, I would call together the elders of the church and I would say to them, 'Brothers, I think you are suffering from two very serious theological errors:

"One, you think this is your church, but this is not your church. This is the Lord's church. All churches belong only to him; they do not belong to the people; they are not a democracy owned by the congregation. Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," {cf, Matt

16:18}. So all of us are under the authority of the Lord of this church, and it is his job to tell us what he wants the church to be, and not our job to tell him what we think it ought to be."

"The second error is that you think you hired me to work in this church, but you have not. I did not come on that basis. I have joined you to share the ministry with you. I appreciate the fact that you have set me aside, and given me support from the congregation so that I do not have to spend time earning a living, but can devote my full time to the ministry of teaching and preaching. If you will not accept those terms then I will have to look elsewhere. I cannot work on any other terms because that is what the New Testament says."

He went back to his church and they fired him, but now he has another church and he made his stand clear from the beginning and things are working out very well with him.

So much for the status of the under-rowers. They are not unusual; they are not above anybody; they are not authorities within the Church. They are under-rowers of Christ.

Now what is the work of a minister of Christ? Here Paul uses another term. He calls them "stewards of the mysteries of God." Isn't that an enchanting term? The word for steward is *oikonomos*, meaning "housekeeper." Today I think the nearest equivalent would be "administrator," but perhaps we get at the heart of this when we come right back to the old biblical word "steward" or "stewardess." We know what they are. When you are on an airplane you find a stewardess or a steward who serves coffee, tea, milk (and other beverages), and a tray of food at the proper time. They have been entrusted with certain valuable commodities which they are responsible to dispense. That is what a steward is and that is exactly in line with this New Testament picture.

A minister of Christ, whoever he or she may be within a congregation -- and it does include women -- is to be a steward entrusted with what Paul calls "the mysteries of God," that secret and hidden wisdom of God, these valuable truths which are only found in the revelation of the Word of God and nowhere else. They are responsible to dispense them continually to the congregation so that lives are changed and lived on the basis of these remarkable truths.

We have already seen what they are -- truth about life, about our families, about God, and ourselves. These truths lie beyond all secular research and opinion polls; they are undiscoverable by natural reason or observation. These mysteries, when understood, are the basis upon which all God's purposes in our lives are worked out.

Let me remind you of some of them:

1. There is the "mystery of the kingdom of God," {Mark 4:11 KJV}. How often that is mentioned in Scripture. What does it mean? Well, it means an understanding of God at work in history, how he is working through the events of our day and of the days of the past and how he uses these events that fill the pages of our newspapers to carry out his purposes. It is the business of a minister of Christ to unfold that to people, and to help them to understand the events the world interprets on other grounds, but which God is intending to use in a quite different way in history and in their lives. That is the business of a minister of Christ, an under-rower of Christ, a steward of the mysteries of God.
2. There is the "mystery of iniquity" {2 Th 2:7 KJV}, of lawlessness. This is the explanation we desperately need to be reminded of continually, of why we are never able to make any progress when it comes to solving human dilemmas -- why every generation without exception repeats the struggle, problems and difficulties of the previous generation. Isn't that amazing? We do not have instinct to guide us as the animals do, and we never seem to learn from the past. As the philosopher Hegel put it, "History teaches us that history teaches us nothing." That is why we wrestle endlessly, over and over again, with the same basic struggles and problems. There is no advance. Why? Because of the mystery of lawlessness, that evil, invisible panoply of remarkable beings, forces that are constantly twisting and distorting the thinking of men. They lead us down garden paths into error and illusion and cause us to see things out of proportion and out of relationship

with reality. We assume that something is true when it is not and act on that basis. That is why we get mixed up all the time. You will never understand that if you do not understand the mystery of lawlessness.

3. Then there is the counteraction to that -- the "mystery of godliness," {1 Tim 3:16 KJV}. This is the remarkable secret that God has provided by which a Christian is enabled to live right in the midst of the pressures of the world with all of its illusion and all of its danger, not to run away from it but to refuse to conform to it and do so in a loving, gracious way. What is the secret? It is the secret of an imparted life -- "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27b RSV}. Christ in you, available to you -- his life, his wisdom, his strength, his power to act available to you -- to enable you to do what you do not think you can do at the moment, but, when you choose to do, you find you have the strength to perform. That is the mystery of godliness, the most life-transforming doctrine that has ever been set before man, radical in its effect.
4. Then there is the "mystery of the church" {cf, Eph 3:1-6}, that strange new society that God is building which is to be a demonstration of a totally different life style before a watching world, and which is to repel the impact of the world upon it, and, instead, be an impact upon the world around to change it. That is a mystery. Those who are called to teach this and preach this in a church congregation are stewards of that mystery, entrusted with it to set it out and to help people to face the facts of life without fear and favor so that all can experience both the ecstasy and the agony of Christian experience.

That brings us to the third part of the responsibility which is, "Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found faithful." Faithful at what? Well, faithful at dispensing the mysteries so people understand them. You may fail at many things as a teacher, a preacher, a leader of a class. You may not make it in many areas, but do not miss it in this one. Be sure that you are setting forth the mysteries of God. That is what you will be judged on. That is being "a good steward of the mysteries of God," if you set forth these truths.

Paul now turns to a common problem in Verse 3, and that is the evaluation of the minister. Who is to do this? The remarkable thing is that we have hundreds of volunteers -- everybody wants to get in on the act of how to evaluate and judge the minister and how faithful he is or she is. This constitutes a kind of subtle but constant pressure upon everyone who is called to this kind of ministry.

**But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you [Can you imagine how popular that verse was in Corinth? Can't you see them memorizing it and carrying it around with them on little cards?], or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God. {1 Cor 4:3-5 RSV}**

The first pressure Paul mentions is congregational evaluation, and he puts that at the very bottom of the list. "It is a very small thing," he says, "what you think about me. I know you are thinking about me, and I know what you think, but I want you to know I do not think it is very significant."

Stuart Briscoe says there are three kinds of congregational pressure --

- There is adulation, which swells the head;
- There is manipulation, which ties the hands; and
- There is antagonism, which breaks the heart.

I have experienced all three of those as everyone has who seeks to teach and preach the Word of God.

There is adulation. There are always those people -- they mean to be encouraging and in certain degrees and within certain limits they are encouraging -- but they will say nice things all the time, sometimes heaping it on until it begins to swell the head. Many a young pastor and many a teacher within the church has been

ruined by too much adulation.

Many of you will remember the dear little old lady, Alma Davis, who was in this congregation for many years. She first joined this church when it met in the Community Center, some 27 years ago. She was a great encouragement to me as a young pastor because she had come out of a lifetime of churchmanship, but had never known the truth. When she began to hear it, it opened up her life and she began to blossom. She was so grateful, and she said so to me many times. She would say, "Oh! Mr. Stedman, when you say something I really understand it, and I can believe it. I just believe everything you say!" Well that is heady stuff! I had to learn not to believe everything she said, because that was dangerous. She was an encouragement, but too much of that is dangerous stuff, and it can twist and limit a ministry. You start preaching to it, wanting to hear these words, passing over truth that would be unpleasant and speaking of that which will bring forth this kind of thing. Evaluation by the congregation is a subtle pressure.

Then there is manipulation. Every congregation, every church without question has its "power structure" -- people who seek to manipulate and to influence the teaching and the preaching. Sometimes they do it by personality, sometimes by a display of wealth, sometimes by perseverance in persisting and hounding you until you begin to give heed to what they say. There are many ways of putting pressure on a preacher or a teacher to stop being *huperetes* of Christ, but rather turning an ear to what people are saying. You begin to preach to accommodate; you pass over unpleasant doctrines, you begin to ride hobbies, you pass over passages that deal with issues that would create controversy within the congregation, and this is deadly. It destroys the congregation and the life of a church.

Manipulation ties the hands. I have met young pastors across the continent who are ready to quit the ministry because they have run up against the power structure in their church. It has tied their hands, and they are ready to quit. They have forgotten that they are "huperetes" of Christ, and that he will see them through. But they give up and quit the ministry instead.

And then there is antagonism -- outright, sharp, open-faced opposition. A young man was telling me only this week about his experience when he was on the staff of a church in the Bay Area. He said one of the elders stopped him one day and said, "Where are you getting all these ideas? Have you been down to Stedman's church?" The young man answered truthfully, "No, I haven't." The elder grabbed him by the shirt front and said, "I want to tell you something: if I ever hear that you are going down to Stedman's church and coming back with some of those radical ideas, you're out!" Now that is antagonism; that is pressure upon the minister. This is what Paul is speaking of. It breaks the heart of a young pastor or teacher.

Then there is societal evaluation. "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court." Literally, it is "by man's day," the view of mankind in general of a minister. Have you ever noticed the attitude displayed toward ministers in the movies or television? Usually it is a kind of contemptuous, disdainful put-down toward them. Occasionally you will run into the opposite attitude. Sometimes the church begins to make an impact upon its community and everybody in the world outside begins to patronize it, praise it, talk about it and flatter it. That is an attempt again to twist it, and to get you to begin to speak so as to get these encouraging, helpful things said about you. Maybe you will get your name in the paper, and perhaps some recognition by a denomination or by some other group across the country; you will build a reputation. This is a deadly, dangerous thing in a church. Paul says, "Don't pay any attention to it. I don't allow myself to. I'm not affected by any human court. It doesn't make any difference to me."

Then there is a third evaluation. Paul says, "I do not even judge myself." Now that does not mean that he does not look at himself and evaluate what he is doing because he does, and he tells us that he does in other places in Scripture. He also tells us to do it. He says, "Examine yourselves whether you be in the faith or not," {cf, 2 Cor 13:5}. What he means is that he does not take any final notice of that kind of judgment. He realizes that it is incomplete. There is a blindness about ourselves; we are blind to our own faults and failures, and he knows it. And also, we are sometimes unaware of our successes. There have been times when I thought I had totally failed in the preaching of a message, and yet I have seen many instances when that very occasion was the means of reaching people in a remarkable way. I have discovered, as Paul must have discovered, that you cannot accept your own judgment of yourself.

Paul says, he is "not aware of anything against himself" at this moment. He has dealt with all the Lord has

ever shown him about himself. He is not aware of anything, but he knows that he is not acquitted by that. He is not home free because he does not know there is anything wrong at the moment. He says the only evaluation that counts is the Lord's -- "The Lord is judging me." This is present tense; it is something that is going on all the time. In the privacy of his own heart and conscience he says that as he exposed himself to the Word of God and the Spirit of God spoke in his life, he became aware of the Lord's evaluation, what the Lord said was right and what he said was wrong, and what he praised him for.

Then Paul extends that to the great day that is coming when all this will be made public. His advice to the congregation is, "Wait until then before you pronounce judgment on the ministers of Christ. Do not pronounce judgment before the Lord comes who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness." That does not mean evil, necessarily. It means the motives that no one knows; even the man himself does not really know what is going on, why he does things -- "[The Lord] will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God."

I often try to think of this. I live continually in the awareness that one of these days my whole life is going to be examined by my Lord. He is going to walk with me back through all the record of the years. There are some things that I do not want him to see, but I have already faced them so I am not afraid; he has already seen them. There are other things that I am anxious for him to see. I think he is going to praise me for them, but I may be wrong. He may come to them and instead of saying anything he may silently look at them. He does not condemn me, but he goes on, and I am disappointed. I think, "Oh! Lord, I thought I had it that time." Then we will come to some area that I really do not want him to see, and he will say, "Ah, that was the moment. You pleased me then. You were not looking for self-glory; you were not looking for a pat on the back; you did not want anything out of it for yourself. You did it for me and you did not feel very good about it afterward, but I did." "Then every man will receive his commendation from God." He does not condemn us; he commends us. His condemnation comes only in his silence about the wasted areas of our lives.

Now let us clear one thing up very plainly here. Paul is not saying that we are not to judge the actions of men when they do wrong. In the next chapter he scolds this church because they do not judge the actions of a man who has done something wrong in the church. So he is not saying that we are not to judge actions. What he says is, "Do not judge motives, do not assume that you know what has made somebody act the way they have." I find this is a common, constant temptation among us.

I read this morning how Ruth Carter Stapleton, the President's sister, had been invited to speak to a group of Christians trying to evangelize the Jews, and the Jewish Defense League and others put pressure on her, and she backed away from that invitation, and turned it down. On the surface it looks as though she submitted to political pressure, and as I was reading that my heart was tempted to judge her, but I was reminded by this passage, "You do not know her motives." Perhaps she saw it as a way to avoid controversy, and open the door further to the Jews. Maybe she saw it as a need to stay clear of getting involved in a private warfare, and to keep her ministry more open. How do I know what was going on in her heart? This is the very thing Paul is warning against. Do not pronounce judgment on the motives of people. Those will only be disclosed when the Lord returns, and brings to light the hidden things of the heart.

That brings us to Verses 6-7, where the apostle sets forth the freedom that will be enjoyed by a minister when the congregation begins to think rightly about him according to what Paul has described.

**I have applied all this to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brethren, that you may learn by us to live according to scripture, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?**  
{1 Cor 4:6-7 RSV}

It makes a difference what the congregation thinks and the way they treat the ministers in their midst.

The first thing that it will do is that it will eliminate rivalry among them. How many churches have been split right down the center by a rivalry developing between teachers or pastors? That is eliminated when the congregation refuses to be "puffed up in favor of one against another," when they are bound by the word of

Scripture how to think of men and they refuse to take sides and to choose in the ministry of men.

I was reminded of this this very week when our "Family Faire" was on. We had with us Gib Martin, a young pastor from Seattle. He has not developed many of the skills that will come with experience, but in my judgment he had a rich, helpful, insightful ministry with us. And yet I realize a lot of people were turned off the first day or so, because his style is different than most of us around here, and many refused to come to hear him. Now that is doing exactly what Paul is talking about. It is being "puffed up in favor of one against another" and refusing to heed the ministry of a man of God because it does not come in quite the accepted style or the way we are used to. That is wrong, but, if the congregation watches itself, it can free the ministers in their midst so that there is no sense of competition and rivalry between them.

And then, second, it will have its affect upon the minister himself. It will destroy his tendency to personal conceit if he begins to think rightly about himself. Paul asks some searching questions here: "What have you that you did not receive -- you people with gifts of teaching and preaching and prophesying? Where did you get those? You were not born with them. These are spiritual gifts imparted by the Holy Spirit. He could have given them to somebody else. He still could, perhaps. Therefore, how foolish to boast because God has used you in a ministry of some sort. It is only the Lord himself who has done it. How foolish it is to make anything of that, to be proud over what God has given!"

I heard of a young preacher who preached a message to a congregation on a special occasion. God richly blessed the message and it hit with great impact. The young man enjoyed the obvious appearances of success, and afterwards, going home with his wife, evidently thinking over and enjoying the results of that powerful ministry in his own heart, he said to her, "I wonder how many great preachers there are in the world?" His wife replied, "One less than you think!"

What a foolish thing it is to view our gifts as though we were responsible for them. What a freedom can be given in a congregation to those who teach and preach among them if we will refuse to be "puffed up in favor of one against another." The men and women themselves will refuse to take any credit for the ministry and for the gift that God has given them.

## Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for these insightful words that help us to understand how this church functions and how we are being ministered to by gifts of your grace among us. Help us to support those who help us in these areas, who teach and preach and evangelize among us. Help us to hold them up in prayer before you that they will not be conceited or proud, but walk before you in humility, recognizing that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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