

Leadership in Biblical Perspective  
“Seven Observations of Effective Leadership in a Local Church”

I Corinthians 3:1–17

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In this study we will look at I Corinthians 3 and draw out seven observations on effective leadership within a local church. Here is the Apostle Paul to a church where he spent 18 months in ministry in their midst and this was the second longest tenure that he had anywhere. He had three years at Ephesus and 18 months at Corinth. This is what he says to them.

I Corinthians 3:1–17 says [1] *But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. [2] I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, [3] for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? [4] For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?*

[5] *What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. [6] I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. [7] So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. [8] He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. [9] For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.*

[10] *According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. [11] For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. [12] Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—[13] each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. [14] If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. [15] If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*

[16] *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? [17] If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God's Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

Before I come to this text there are two things I'd like for you to think about. The first is Matthew 16. They are on the road to Caesarea Philippi, and Jesus asks His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” [14] *And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” [15] He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” [16] Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” [17] And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and (hear this promise Jesus makes) on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:14–18)*

There is one thing you can be assured of when Jesus comes back and that is His church will be standing strong in the Lord but He is speaking of His church universal so that does not mean every local church will stand. We have seen local churches disappear with false teaching,

with bad leadership, with self-centered leadership and with compromising leadership. Almost always when local churches and denominations fail it is traced back to the leadership. By in large, churches go where leadership takes them. Good leadership lead to good results and bad leadership lead to bad results. It is an awesome thing and privilege to be placed in a position of leadership, whether it's a teaching elder, ruling elder or a deacon. They set the pace. They set the standard.

Our Lord is very clear for we answer for our leadership. Our ministries will be tested one day. Did we build wood, hay and stubble or did we build gold, silver and precious jewels? When the fire of judgment comes on our ministries, not in the day of salvation for He has already said we are saved, if gold, silver and precious jewels comes out of your ministry then they will just get refined. They don't disappear but self-oriented or self-aggrandizing or self-reliant or self-promoting that is wood, hay and stubble and that will just get burned up. That was worthless. Sometimes it gets burned up even before we get to that day because we're not building upon the foundation and we're not using materials of substance.

I'll never forget the trip my wife and I made up here from Christ Covenant in 1995 in order to take a look at this building. You will find some amazing similarities in the building of Christ Covenant in Charlotte, North Carolina and the building here at Briarwood. One of the things one of the architects said who had a good Christian world and life view was, "We're not going to put materials that don't last even though they are cheaper. We are going to build a building that is going to anticipate until Jesus comes. We want this building to be here. We're going to try and make a statement with the materials that are used of what we believe God can do." We use materials of substance, not just simply for a church building but for ministry in the lives of God's people.

The second thing I want you to plant in your mind is that the leadership at Corinth was not good here. The leadership had been divisive and it has caused factions in the church. Paul said, 'Even when I led you to Christ and treated you as infants giving you the milk of the Word you haven't progressed beyond that. Your leaders have not taken you there for on the contrary your leaders have been occasions for your divisions. You have divided up with idolatry of leaders and manipulation of leaders who have their own agenda instead of the agenda of Christ, the foundation and purpose of the church.'

Then Paul teaches them about leadership in the church by using three metaphors for the church. He tells them that they need to be people of maturity and people of maturity don't worship and identify with the leaders. They are served by the leaders so that they can identify and focus upon Christ. That is the growth of maturity. I'm not saying leaders aren't important but the leaders are not where you fix your eyes. Your eyes are fixed upon Jesus and that is what leaders are supposed to do – fix their eyes upon Jesus, exalt Him and lift Him up. That hadn't been done in this church and so Paul decides to take this on and gives three word pictures for the church.

Paul says since we're servants he wants them to see the church in three ways. Number one he says that we are God's field. How do I know he is talking about the church and not the individual Christian? In the text when Paul says 'you are God's field' Paul is speaking with a southern accent for when he says 'you' it means 'ya'll', in fact he probably said 'all ya'll.' If he was talking about the individual Christian he would have said 'ya'll are God's fields' with fields being plural, but he doesn't say it that way. He uses field in the singular, referring to God's field, His church. Paul has workers who are supposed to build on that foundation with gold, silver and precious jewels.

Then Paul gives a second picture of the God's church. He says that all of us are God's building. He refers to himself as an Apostle so he is a master builder, one of the project managers but all the rest of us are workers. We have a foundation that is laid and that is Jesus Christ for there is no other foundation that can uphold the church of God. We are to see God's church as a building where we are living stones that are being built into this building and we are the builders. Some of us are Apostles so some are master builders but all of us are just workers on the building.

The third picture Paul gives of God's church is that we all are God's temple. Again he is not speaking of the individual Christian. There is another text in the Bible that speaks of the individual Christian as a temple of the Holy Spirit but here he is talking about the church because the use of temple is singular. All of us together are God's temple and it's the place where the Holy Spirit dwells among you.

When you walk through that, to be a leader that builds upon the foundation of Christ so that a local church reflects the universal church with its staying power and effectiveness, then what do we see about the leaders in this text that are portrayed through these three word pictures of the church? There are seven things about the leaders and here they are.

The first thing he tells us about the leaders is that the effective church is led by leaders who take the time to lead. Did you notice the process in the text? There was planting, watering, cultivating, building and that takes time. We are so obscene in our culture that we even make and people buy packages of instant grits. I can't believe there is a market for instant grits. There is no way that is any good. Instant coffee is bad enough to think about. Instant grits is blasphemy. God can do things as He pleases for He made the heavens and the earth in six days. In a moment in time He can bring from nothing that which exists forever. That is not the issue. The issue is that God works through leaders upon leaders upon leaders and the leaders take the time to patiently build with materials of substance upon the foundation. There are no short cuts.

Secondly, an effective church requires gifted, committed, and sacrificial leaders. Paul said that he planted, Apollos watered, God gave the increase so we are nothing. Through us you believe but we're nothing because if God had not gifted us you wouldn't be here. If God had not called us we wouldn't be here. If God hadn't blessed what we did in your life you wouldn't be here either. So we are just instruments. The other week I had surgery and I'm going to see my doctor on Tuesday hoping to get the greenlight that everything will be alright. When I see my doctor the first thing I will do is thank him. I am not going to go to the operating room and thank the scalpel he used. I'm grateful he had sense to get a good scalpel and grateful I was asleep and didn't see him use it on me. I do know that the scalpel didn't do a thing without that doctor. Leaders sent by Christ and designed by Christ can't do a single thing unless the Lord who called them and gifted them blesses what they do.

So effective leaders take time to what is right before God in a right way before God, committed to God's glory and their unity. Paul says we're nothing but we're one. We may be doing different things but there is unity here. Our unity is that it is all about Jesus and not all about us. So these are gifted, committed, sacrificial servant leaders.

Thirdly, the effective church has one foundation and that one foundation can never be any leader in that church. That foundation must be Jesus Christ. He is the Capstone, the Keystone, the Cornerstone and the Foundation Stone of the effective church that stands and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Fourthly, the effective church is Trinitarian. I'm very grateful for the series this year on the Holy Spirit because no one believes as much in the preeminence of Jesus as Creator,

Redeemer and Sustainer than me. I love Christ-centered, Christ-exalting preaching, teaching and discipleship but our Gospel is not a one person of the Trinity Gospel. It is a Trinitarian Gospel. You see the Trinity woven into this. God the Father called them and gave the leaders His Son, Jesus who is the second Person of the Trinity and the Foundation and the Holy Spirit dwells within the temple, that local church. It is clearly a Trinitarian Gospel that we embrace. It is one God in three Persons. The Father has authored our salvation, the Son has accomplished it and the Holy Spirit has and is applying it.

Fifthly, the effective church has leaders who promote unity in the fellowship of diversity. There are leaders but God gives different gifts. He is planting, watering, cultivating, weeding, laying a foundation, putting down mortar, plowing it up and so leaders have different gifts. Praise the Lord for that but any leader who we celebrate their diversity that leader always makes sure to promote the unity of the leadership. I love the way Paul says we are nothing but we are one. We are one in the Lord.

Number six is the effective church has leaders who intentionally seek to be assets in the church and not to be liabilities to overcome in the church. Leaders seek to mature God's people, not to be liabilities that undermine the maturity of God's people.

The last one (seventhly) is the effective church effectively led, matures the membership from milk to meat. The membership will value, support and encourage the leadership but will not idolize the leadership. They will not say 'I am a Paul' or 'I am an Apollos' but they will pray for the leaders and be grateful for the leaders but they will not worship their leaders. An immature membership will focus on the leaders. Mature memberships are led by mature leaders.

I will say this to the leaders; if the congregation is not mature then we're not doing our job. It has to begin with us and our maturity. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Help us to keep our focus and our eyes on You. Bless our leaders and our membership, Your people. We want to be an effective church for Your glory, in Jesus' Name, Amen.