

THREE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MINISTERS

3⁵After all, what is Apollos? And what is Paul? [We are] ministers through whom you came to believe; each [doing what] the Lord gave him [to do].⁶I planted [the seed], Apollos watered it; but God made it grow.⁷So then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is of any significance; but the one who causes [the seed] to grow—God.⁸Now the one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose; and each will be rewarded according to his own labor.⁹We are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰By the grace of God that was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation; and someone else builds upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it; ¹¹for no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If any man builds upon this foundation with gold, silver, and precious gems, or with wood, hay, and stubble, ¹³[let it be known that] each man's work will be revealed. The [Judgment] Day will make it evident, because it will be revealed with fire—the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴If any man's work that he has built upon [the foundation] survives, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵If any man's work is burnt up, he shall suffer loss. Yet he himself shall be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Cor. 3:5-15)

Introduction

One common view of the minister that was especially prevalent close to a century ago was that of the “Domini,” the Dutch word for preacher. His black attire was well suited to his solemn demeanor; he was the official representative of the church; and at times, perhaps, was almost equated with deity.

Another view of the minister is that of the “Meddler” or the “Social Agitator.” In the south they have a saying that defines the preacher’s application of his sermon as “meddling,” they say, “The preacher has left off preaching and has gone to meddling!” In evangelical churches the “meddling” is usually done from the pulpit or perhaps in home visitations; in more liberal churches the “meddling” may take the form of organized public protest against the social sins of the nation.

Yet another view of the minister might be that of the “Celebrity.” Here is the T.V. or radio preacher who has a nationwide following; he may have a charismatic personality, he may be something of an entertainer, he may be a bit of a psychologist, or even the builder of a personal religious empire. Closely related to the “Celebrity” is the more cynical view of the minister as the “Huckster.” He is viewed as little more than a Bible-thumping charlatan, making his living by peddling religion to gullible souls.

All of these are extreme caricatures of the minister, but they do serve to point out an all too common practice. Namely, the fact that we often tend to focus too much on ministers themselves, either exalting them or disparaging them; rather than viewing

them as being ministers of Christ—with the focus being on Christ, not on the minister.

That is what the Corinthian Christians were doing, focusing on the ministers rather than focusing upon Christ the Lord. Thus, the Apostle Paul had to remind them of the minister's true identity and calling: the minister is called to be a minister of Christ. Because he is a minister of Christ, your minister is called to faithfully work for Christ and present Christ to you. As we examine this present passage of Scripture, let us consider Three Things You Should Know about Ministers.

I. Your Minister is Called to be a Servant of Christ (3:5-9)

The Corinthians were caught up in “hero worship”—they liked to glory in men rather than glory in God. In particular, they liked to identify themselves with their favorite preacher, exalting him and criticizing all others, note 1 Corinthians 1:12, *“each one of you is saying, I belong to Paul; or, I belong to Apollos; or, I belong to Cephas.”*

In the context of this spiritual problem that was all too prevalent in the Corinthian church, Paul asks the question, *“After all, what is Apollos? And what is Paul?”* (vs. 5.) His answer may have come as a shock to the hero-worshipping Corinthians, but he defines himself and the other preachers and leaders of the church as *“ministers.”* The Greek word, δίακονος, translated, *“ministers,”* is the same word from which is derived the term, “deacon;” the word was used of those who served and engaged in very menial acts of service—like Christ Himself. When our Lord stooped down to wash His disciples’ feet He was engaging in an act of service that was normally preformed by the most menial household servant: *“Then he poured water into the basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him”* (Jn. 13:5.) In Matthew 20:28 the Lord Jesus defines His ministry in the following terms: *“the Son of man did not come to receive ministry, but to minister [δίακονεω] and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

Each minister is to serve Christ by *“doing what the Lord gave him to do”* (vs. 5.) That is to say, each one is to serve Christ by using the spiritual gifts entrusted to him and serving Christ in the place where the Lord has put him, as Paul explains in verse 6. Paul *“planted [the seed]”*—he brought the gospel to Corinth and introduced the Corinthians to the Savior. Apollos *“watered it”*—he nurtured the Corinthian believers in the Christian faith. *“But God made it grow”*—apart from the divine working of God, the ministries of Paul and Apollos would have been ineffective and fruitless.

Paul wants it to be clearly understood by the church that it is not the minister who is significant; it is God alone who is significant. It is the Lord who employs ministers in His service and who alone can make their work effective and fruitful—and He does so for His own glory, as Paul testified in 1 Corinthians 1:30-

31, *“It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—righteousness and sanctification and redemption; ³¹in order that it may be just as it has been written, ‘He who boasts, let him boast in the LORD.’”*

Far from there being a rivalry between ministers, there is a basic unity: *“the one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose”* (vs. 8.) Regardless of their unique gifts or spheres of service, all true ministers of Christ have a fundamental unity of purpose: serving Christ by ministering His Word and His grace to His people. As Paul expresses this truth in verse 9, *“we are God’s fellow workers,”* laboring in God’s field and in the construction of God’s building, the church—it is all of God and through God and for God.

First and foremost, we must realize and appreciate the fact that the minister is called to be *“a minister”* (*“a servant”*) of Christ. We should ask such questions as these: Is my minister presenting Christ to me? Is he putting Christ first and seeking to honor Christ in all that he does? Note the testimony of Paul presented in Galatians 1:10; *“If I were still pleasing men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”*

II. Your Minister is Called to Build upon the Foundation of Christ (3:10-11)

Picking up on his illustration of the church being God’s building, Paul describes himself as *“a master builder”* who laid the foundation (vs. 10.) He is referring to his divine calling to be an apostle and in that capacity to preach the gospel as the church’s only foundation, note Matthew 16:15-18,

But what about you? [Jesus] asked. Who do you say I am? ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. ¹⁷Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. (Matt. 16:15-18)

The “rock” to which the Lord Jesus refers is Peter’s confession, as well as the ministry of Peter and the rest of the apostles in proclaiming that confession to the world. The foundation is not only the facts of the gospel, but is also the living personal relationship with Christ as He is offered to us in the gospel. Paul declares that we as believers are *“members of God’s household, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone”* (Eph. 2:19-20.) In compliance with the Apostle Paul’s instructions, Timothy is not merely to maintain purity of doctrine, that doctrine is to lead to and be accompanied by *“faith and love in Christ Jesus.”* Paul exhorts young Timothy, *“What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus”* (2 Tim. 1:13.) The church’s foundation is the truth about Christ, which results in a true saving relationship with Christ.

Paul, together with the other apostles, were used by Christ to lay the foundation—all true ministers of Christ are called to build upon that foundation. Each succeeding minister must carefully consider how he is building on that foundation (vs. 10b.) Is his construction in line with the foundation? No one has the ability nor the authority to lay any foundation beside the foundation of Jesus Christ, note Galatians 1:8-9, *“even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹As we have already said, so now I say again, If anyone is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”* Such is the warning of the Apostle Paul to those who would in any way depart from the gospel of Christ. In the words of the hymn writer, “On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.” Is your minister consistently proclaiming the gospel: the good news that Jesus saves from the penalty of sin and from the power of sin?

Is your minister's construction “up to code?” Is he building with quality materials? *“Gold, silver, precious gems”* is referring to sound doctrine that is true to the Word of God, a faithful exposition of the Word, and a consistent application of the Word to the lives of God's people. Note Paul's counsel to Timothy, *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one who is approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth”* (2 Tim. 2:15.) Is there quality workmanship in your minister's ministry? Does your minister exemplify a sound biblical lifestyle, which commends the Word of God and the gospel of Christ to the world and is a model for the people of God? Note 1 Timothy 4:12, *“set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.”* Note, too, the Paul's own testimony: *“Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, by Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God”* (2 Cor. 2:17.)

Your minister is called to build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. Is he consistently presenting Jesus Christ and Him crucified? Is he calling men to come to faith in Christ as the only Savior, and is he calling upon believers to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as disciples of Christ?

III. Your Minister is Called to Use Quality Building Materials for Christ (3:12-15)

A true minister of Christ should be building upon the sure foundation using only the finest quality building materials: *“gold, silver, precious gems.”* That is to say, there must be sound biblical teaching unmixed with the alloys of human philosophy or human psychology; with the objective being the accomplishment of the will of God to the glory of God, as opposed to any human agenda or man-centered goals.

A true minister of Christ must guard against the use of shoddy building materials (“*wood, hay, stubble.*”) What is being referred to is teaching that is less than biblical, teaching that caters to the whims of the hearers rather than challenging them to pursue the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Note 2 Timothy 4:2-5,

... the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵But you, be self-controlled in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Tim. 4:2-5)

The apostle assures us, “*each man’s work will be revealed.*” One may think that he can get by with using inferior materials; another may feel his choice of quality materials has gone unappreciated—but not so! “*the [Judgment] Day will make it evident.*” The Day of Christ’s return will be the day of revelation; it will prove to be not only the day when He will judge the world, but also the day when He will judge each minister’s labors.

On the Day of Christ “*the fire will test the quality of each man’s work*” (vs. 13.) The fire of Christ’s holy presence will test and reveal the quality and durability of each man’s work. The work composed of “*gold, silver, precious gems*” will withstand the flames and come forth with purified brilliance. The work composed of “*wood, hay, stubble*” will be consumed, leaving nothing but charred rubble laying upon the sure foundation.

Whoever’s work endures the flames of Christ’s inspection shall receive a reward, as our Lord himself indicated in His parable of the Faithful Servant: “*His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your lord’*” (Matt. 25:21.) Whoever’s shoddy work is consumed shall suffer loss; his life’s work shall go up in smoke—all that is superficial, compromising, and false. But he himself—as a true believer in Christ—shall be saved, “*but only as one escaping through the flames.*” By way of illustration, it will be like a man clothed in a fireproof asbestos suit carrying a pile of worthless, combustible rubble through the flames. The rubble will be consumed by the fire, while he himself is spared by virtue of being clothed by the asbestos suit—although protected, he will acutely feel the heat of the flames. The man whose ministry has consisted on shoddy workmanship, using inferior materials, will barely survive the ordeal—a ministry of shoddy workmanship betrays a heart that is less than right with God, a heart that is more concerned with worldly success or attainment than with the glory of Christ.

Your minister is called to use quality building materials in his labors for Christ. Is your minister seeking to handle the Word of God with care and diligence as he is instructed to do from 2 Timothy 2:15?

Do your best to present yourself to God as one who is approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.
(2 Tim. 2:15)

Conclusion

This is your minister's calling: to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ; to build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified; and to use quality building materials.

In the light of this high calling, what minister would not echo the words of the Apostle Paul when he cried out, "*Who is capable for such a task?*" (2 Cor. 2:16b.) May each minister of Christ also echo with confidence these further words of the Apostle Paul: "*our capability comes from God*" (2 Cor. 3:5.) Like the Apostle Paul, may each minister of Christ solicit the prayers of God's people for his ministry, even as Paul pleaded with the Thessalonians, "*Brothers, pray for us*" (1 Thess. 5:25.)