

*Look in my eyes, what do you see?
The cult of personality...
I exploit you; still you love me
I tell you one and one makes three
I'm the cult of personality...*

Classic rock lyrics from the band Living Colour, who holds the distinction of being the most successful African-American Hair-Metal band from the 1980s. Released 30 years ago in 1988, "Cult of Personality" hit #9 on the Billboard Charts, and later won the Grammy for best hard rock song of the year.

The lyrics warn of the dangers of following powerful leaders just because they're powerful leaders. Sometimes, they say, you may be following a Gandhi. But you might also end up following a Stalin or a Mussolini. And they're not just talking about political leaders. They also warn about religious leaders.

*You gave me fortune, you gave me fame
You gave me power, in your God's name
I'm every person you need to be
I'm the cult of personality*

A cult of personality is not just a phenomenon of the 20th and 21st century. It was an issue in the 1st century. The imperial cult of Caesar was a perennial problem for the early church. Many Christians had to choose between worshipping God and worshipping Caesar.

But it was not just an external threat to the early church. In Corinth a budding cult of personality was also a problem within the early church.

In our Epistle reading, Paul is cautioning the Corinthians to be careful about constructing a cult of personality around their leaders. Some of the Corinthian Christians appear to be coalescing around Apollos. And some are forming a faction around Paul. And some are forming other factions. And Paul is trying to nip it in the bud. We heard him say, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe."¹

And then Paul uses a couple of illustrations. As to the leaders, Paul says, "We are God's servants, working together... (and as to you Corinthians) you are God's field, God's building."²

Two wonderful images. First God's field. "I planted (Paul says), Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So (Paul says,) neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."³

¹ 1Cor 13:5

² 1Cor 13:9

³ 1Cor 13:6-7

The planter and the waterer are working toward a common purpose. But it is God's field, and God gives the growth.

Yes, the planter does come first. Paul is giving them a not-so-subtle reminder that he was the one who first planted the Corinthian church. Then other leaders came along later and helped nurture it. But bottom line—God is responsible for any growth. It's not about human leaders. It's about God.

Then Paul uses the image of God's building. "I laid the foundation (Paul says,) and someone else is building on it... (but) that foundation is Jesus Christ."⁴

Again, Paul came first and laid the foundation. Others came later and built upon it. But the foundation of the building is Christ. And a little while later in the chapter, the identity of the "building," the Christian community is made clear. Paul says that they are to be a Temple. Their purpose is worship. The foundation of the Church is Jesus. And the purpose of the Church is to praise God.

So Paul is giving a pretty strong admonition. Don't get caught up in factionalism. And don't get caught up in the human tendency to idolize leaders, to form a cult of personality. Instead, focus on God. Worshipping God is your purpose. Any growth comes from God. The building is God's. We are just construction workers. The field is God's. We are just planters or waterers. Important admonitions to Christian leaders.

Today, we mark the graduation of the 2nd class of the School of Ordained Ministry in the Diocese Northwest Texas. And as you contemplate your own ministries, Paul's words are important reminders. It's not about us. It's not about our ministries. It's not our church.

The Church belongs to God. It is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. And it's been around for some 1,985 years. So we take our turns ministering within the church in various ways for a relatively short period of time. But it's never about us. At most, we help to build. At most, we act as planters or waterers. But the field is God's. The building is God's. The church is God's. Those are important reminders from Paul to us.

But there are two other wonderful images hidden away in our Epistle lesson. We can easily miss them in translation. And yet they're both also important reminders to Christian leaders. So I want to tease them out.

In our translation, the word "servant" appears twice. But that English translation masks two powerful images.

The first time servant is used, it's the word *diakonos*, or deacon. "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants (or *diakonoi*, or deacons) through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each."

⁴ 1Cor 13:10-11

Should Paul and Apollos be in competition? No. They are fellow servants, fellow deacons. And remember, deacons were originally those who served at table. They were waiters. They set the table and brought the food prepared by someone else.

Again, the table and the kitchen belong to another. It is God's table, and God provides the meal. The leaders are to be waiters, serving God's people. Does the waiter prepare the food? No. Can the waiter improve upon the food? No. How can we do better than feeding God's people with Christ's own body and blood?

But can a waiter mess up a meal? Yes. And this is a huge caution for us. It's God's table and God's meal. But our actions are important. We can be conduits of God's grace. We can help convey God's love to others.

But we also have the very real ability to be impediments, to mess things up. A bad waiter can ruin a dining experience, even if the finest chef is in the kitchen.

And church history on the largest scale, and church histories of individual congregations often contain stories of leaders messing things up. So we must be careful and cautious and diligent. We must remember who we are. We are servants of another, and servants of each other.

It's humble and humbling work. Waiters and gardeners and builders don't always enjoy the highest status in the ways the world measures status. But since it's God's table, or God's field, or God's building, there is no nobler task.

What is Paul or Apollos? What is Jim or Robert or Jared or Melissa or Scott? What is Karen or Courtney or Mark or Alvin or Kathy? Servants through whom others can come to believe. Waiters who serve up God's word and sacraments. Workers who tend to God's field or extend God's building. And we all engage in this work together.

As Paul also says, "The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose... For we are God's servants, working together."⁵

And this time, the word "servants" is completely different. It's actually an unfortunate choice of English translation that masks an important message. The NRSV translates the Greek word *synergoi* as "servants, working together." But most other English translations use the more traditional translation, "fellow-workers" or "co-workers."

In fact, the word appears 12 times in Paul's epistles and the NRSV itself translates *synergos* as "co-worker" or "fellow worker" 10 of those times. But not here, which is unfortunate.

⁵ 1Cor 3:8-9

Now, you SOM students may be thinking that I'm violating one of the things that we taught you about preaching, and you're right. Going off on some tangent about a Greek vocabulary word is usually not advisable. Usually a long discussion of a word like *synergos* is a homiletical no-no. So do as I say and not as I do. BUT... there is an important meaning here.

Because Paul over and over again uses *synergos* or co-worker or fellow worker in a pretty narrow way.

Paul uses this term to refer to people, usually by name. Over and over again Paul uses this term to refer to men and women who are part of his missionary organization. They're his posse. His group. They're part of his church planting team. Timothy, Titus, Clement, Justus, Urbanus, Epaphroditus, Prisca, Aquila, Jason, and many, many others.

But in our Epistle today, Paul adds another name. Not the name of someone on his team. No. Paul adds a name of someone that others view as one of his rivals. Paul adds the name of someone whom others are coalescing around as an alternative leader to Paul.

Yes, Paul is calling Apollos one of his fellow-workers.

Their culture says, "Partisanship." Paul says, "Partnership."
Their culture says, "Competition." Paul says, "Cooperation."

"The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose... For we are God's servants, working together / God's fellow workers."

This is an important message for anyone, lay or clergy, who ministers in the church. But this is an especially important message for SOM graduates. Because we live in a hyper-polarized culture in hyper-polarized times. And that hyper-polarization can and does sometimes bleed into the Christian church. We sometimes get caught up in the ways of the spirit of our age, rather than following the ways of God's Holy Spirit.

We often get caught up in competition and turf wars. These happen within congregations. They happen between congregations. And they happen between Episcopalians and other Christians.

Thus Paul's example is important. All of these other Christians, even those with whom we find ourselves in disagreement, are still fellow-workers for God. This is an important reminder especially in our part of the world.

We are surrounded by numerous Christian groups who often have a very different approach to religion than we do. And yes, some of the theology some of these other groups espouse from time to time can be downright toxic. And yes, many in this room have been hurt by some of these groups. And yes, there is a long list of reasons why I'm an Episcopalian and not part of one of these other groups.

Nonetheless, it's important to remember, they and we are fellow workers for God. That doesn't mean we need to ignore areas of important disagreement. Paul himself was EXTREMELY clear when he needed to oppose toxic theology himself. If it's an important ditch to die in, then stand and fight.

But if it's simply getting caught up in a cultural spirit of partisanship or competition or division, then remember Paul's admonition. What are Paul and Apollos? Servants. Deacons. Fellow workers. Thus whenever we can work together and find areas of agreement, it's important to do so.

One of the things I'm proudest of in Lubbock is our participation in St. Benedict's Chapel, a feeding ministry to the homeless and working poor. It is made up of an odd collection of churches. It includes 4 mainline Churches: First Christian plus our 3 Episcopal parishes, St. Chris, St. Stephen's, & St. Paul's. But our partners in ministry are Holy Spirit Catholic, First Baptist, Second Baptist, and Monterey Church of Christ. That's about as odd and diverse a group of churches as you can get in Lubbock. And yet, we serve together to serve God's people.

Paul admonishes us to work together, to be fellow workers. Cooperation can build up. Competition can tear down.

Two battling construction workers can damage the building they're in.
Two fighting farm workers can destroy tender crops in the field.
Two brawling waiters can ruin a meal, preventing people from being fed.

Soon-to-be graduates of SOM—what you do is important. And the way you choose to do it is important.

The building is God's. The field is God's. The table is God's. You are his servants. You are fellow workers in his service.

Seek God's glory.
Serve God's people.
Feed them and build them up on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May God give you the will to do these things.
May God give you the grace and power to perform them.