

June 5

I Corinthians 4, Part 1 – God’s Elegant Mysteries

Annette Hill Briggs

I Corinthians 4

[The Ministry of the Apostles]

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. ⁴ I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ 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 each one will receive commendation from God.

⁶ I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, “Nothing beyond what is written,” so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! ⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. ¹⁰ We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, ¹² and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

[Fatherly Admonition]

¹⁴ I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶ I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church. ¹⁸ But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the

kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power. ²¹ What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

If in our heart of hearts we do not love the church, what we do here doesn't much matter. Not really. Not beyond the handful of poor people we help in a given year, or beyond how hard we work Rob and Erika one month a year, or beyond the feelings of the people in the room. We aren't curing cancer or solving any world problems.

As we grow in Christ, we grow in love . . . for the church, hopefully, because we grow in love for people, all people, and we grow in grace – which is, in part, our capacity to keep loving the same people for a long, long time. And *that*, Friends, is *church*. Loving the same people for a long time, as Christ has always loved us.

Which isn't to say we can't love the church and at the same time be mortifyingly embarrassed by what gets said and done in the name of church. Nor is it to say that the church isn't heartbreakingly broken, compromised, and corrupted. But to love Christ is also to love the world as Christ loved us, believing that Christ gave his own body and life for us.

We, in our life together, are now his body: his arms, legs, heart and hands; the mind and muscle and the money by which his will shall be done in the world – or not. And this was the big reminder at my preaching conference. No one else has been called or assigned this task. It is ours. Our calling. Our privilege. Our purpose in this world.

With our words and with our lives and, most of all, with our life together, we offer the world an up-close, real-time vision of reality, offered nowhere else by anyone else: simply that the way the world is, is NOT how the world has to be. Scarcity, violence, abuse, crushing debt, war, racism, sexism, poverty, addiction, terror, constant anxiety, mind-bending loneliness, hatred, xenophobia, famine, climate disaster – all of them, to the one and many more – are self-imposed human conditions. Imposed by humans upon humans.

Imposed by humans who may or may not believe they have choice, but mostly don't know there's an alternative, and almost certainly don't know that WE are it: Church, the friends of Jesus, life together shared fully by people who have come together to know it in the deepest way, in ways beyond words. Now I can concede, from my spot in the Styrofoam cave, it's not always obvious, but it still is WHY we do everything we do, why we stack Gatorade in the kitchen, why we write checks for \$27, 000 [*referring to VBS decorations and the Habitat for Humanity project*].

We do it because we know that in Christ we already have everything we need, we know what the world does not know: that there is nothing to hoard, to fight over, to borrow against or to steal. There's no need for war, because there is nothing worth

killing over. No borders to protect, because we are brothers and sisters of the same God. What God gives me belongs to you if you need it. Enough. There is enough.

But. . . it's tricky. First of all, because church people do embarrassing things. And there is only ONE Christendom, not the embarrassing church and our church. Secondly, nothing is ever as simple as it seems and sounds on Sunday morning. Knowing we have all we need in Christ sounds so obvious here and now and so absurd almost all the rest of the time!

And one more thing, Friends. If we don't love the church, we will not understand Paul or 1st Corinthians. He calls himself their father, the one raising them in the faith, in their life together. He's a little put out in chapter 4 because they've strayed. They haven't listened. He's got to go over some things again – things he will go over yet again before the letter is through.

He's working with them on two things in this chapter. They were judging him, first of all. And they were too prideful – positively full of themselves for being so wise. I've been over this sermon and decided it's two sermons. I know it's disappointing for you but I'm cutting them apart to do the *pride* part next week. I'll give you a second to be sad about that before going on.

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Do you know how being a pastor is NOT like being a brain surgeon? Most people don't secretly assume they could also be a brain surgeon, if they wanted to. Most people don't even have opinions about how brain surgeons could be better at brain surgery. I'm not complaining – because I know this is part of being a pastor. It's part of being a first-grade teacher too. And President of the United States. Having most of the people I know secretly believe they can do my job as well and probably better than I do.

Pastors without tender hearts, thick skins, and a sense of humor don't thrive in ministry. Sadly, they stay in ministry – but they do not thrive. Paul did. He did because early on he understood *authority*. He springs on it immediately in chapter 4. *We are servants of Christ* – the implication being: *not yours; we are not YOUR servants; we do not work for you*. We work – I WORK – for Christ, for the Lord himself.

It was cleaner for Paul than for preachers like me, since they didn't pay his salary. But it was messy for him too, because he loved them. You'll never convince me that how they felt about him didn't matter to him at all. BUT *how we feel is not how we have to talk*. That's called *boundaries* – so critical in ministry, as in all relationships.

How Paul talks, what he says, is *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself*. [I Cor. 4:3] I don't believe, necessarily, that Paul is writing his *personal truth* here, so much as he is writing his *pastoral truth*. This is what they need from Paul the Pastor. They are out of line for judging him. We aren't even given to know for what they are judging him.

Doesn't matter. What does matter? Church matters. The gospel matters. And church doesn't work if church people get sidetracked into arguments and fusses that have nothing to do with moving the church and the gospel into the world.

At which point I simply must stop and ask if you have seen, "Ricky and the Flash"? It's a movie from last year. Because you must. You must! I'll only give away one scene. Meryl Streep, who plays Ricky, is crying because her kids hate her (and they hate her for really good reasons, by the way), and her sort-of-boyfriend Greg (played by Rick Springfield) tells her to stop it, stop punishing herself – because, as he says, "it's not our kids' job to love us. It's our job to love them." And right there, in the terrible kitchen of the terrible bar where they are aged-out, kind of terrible rock band, the story shifts from darkness to light.

Because that's the moment when the relationships found their right order. Ricky finally begins to think and to act like a mother. She's still nutty but responsible, mature, taking care of the business of mothering regardless of her kids' reaction, which is exactly how kids usually respond when parents act like parents. But it costs her some humiliation and some agonizingly awkward moments. That's authority – where the people who are assigned to take care, step up and take care, and the ones in need of care receive it.

It doesn't always feel easy; it isn't always appreciated; it isn't even always understood in the moment. But when it is faithful, the church works; the church's business gets done. Paul's authority isn't unlimited. He defines it in verse 3. "*We have been entrusted with the stewardship of God's mysteries.*" It's positively elegant, I think, the way he puts it: "*entrusted with the stewardship of God's mysteries.*" Elegant – and hard to remember when one is schlepping Gatorade in the rain. But those *mysteries* – *that's the gospel*, that alternate way of life, rooted in God's choice to redeem humanity in the crucified and resurrected Christ.

And it is always there. On the page and schlepping Gatorade in the rain. Who decides? Who decides the difference between *God's elegant mysteries* and the *fusses that sidetrack us away from moving the church/gospel into the world*? In Corinthians, Paul does. Because not only does he carry the authority, deeply; he also carries the responsibility, deeply.

Verses 4 and 5:

⁴ I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ 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 each one will receive commendation from God.

Inasmuch as Paul is not their servant neither, then, is he finally accountable to them. He is – as their pastor and their father – accountable to God.

Friends, how tempting, how easy to read along as if Paul and Apollos and I were somehow colleagues, going for dinner, talking shop, trading stories of difficult days, difficult people over the years. So much more tempting, so much easier, than telling the truth – the truth that it isn't church people, *but clergy*, who are the worst offenders. It is pastors and preachers and youth ministers and seminary professors who have failed to listen and understand Paul – not church members who get sidetracked into senseless arguments – that confound the gospel.

It is not church people nearly so much as it is pastors, ministers, who have taken and continue to take disgraceful, abusive advantage of the *authority entrusted to us as stewards of God's mysteries*; who have used that authority not to give the gospel away freely, but to groom and gain access to the souls entrusted to us; who have used this authority as a haven for self-indulgence of every kind, for spiritualizing what is nothing other than abuse, plain and simple – abuse that sometimes destroys families and congregations, but usually not. Usually it just hurts an individual soul, a soul that should never be touched by anyone else, a soul stained by someone entrusted with it by God, a soul that carries a secret wound for which she or he blames herself or himself, while ministers carry on being ministers.

Our own Protestant ranks are crawling with predators who stand in pulpits every single week. And it shames me to say so, but shames me more not to. The church cloaks them to protect our self. But not Paul. Not on his watch. *Do not take one step down the road of judging me*, he tells his church. And he can say that – skipping all the way to verse 15 – *Because while you may have ten thousand guardians* (this word is “pedagogue” which my New Testament professor always translated “nanny”), *I am your father*.

It is not your job to judge me; and you don't need to, because I take my calling and my responsibility deeply, seriously. For the Apostle, this is not a light or a small thing to say. Not daily duty but deep commitment, for which he is answerable to God. As am I. And all who are called, entrusted with the stewardship of the gospel and all that means in the lives – the souls – of the people among whom we serve. If only we had the humility to hear Paul's bravest sentence, in verse 16.

Here's my paraphrase: *If you ever don't know what to do, just imitate me*. Easy-peasy, right? Just be like Paul. But therein is that whole other can of worms I am not going to open until next week, if that's okay with you.

Would you pray with me?