

## Additional Teaching Materials for March 21

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Richard Hays titles his passage on 3:5-23, from which one of this week's scriptures was taken, "The Community and Its Leaders Belong to God." As part of his commentary on the text, Professor Hays includes some reflections for "teachers and preachers." Professor Hays is an ordained UMC pastor and a very well-regarded NT scholar.

Here are his reflections. You might grab a Bible and read 1 Corinthians 3:5-23 before proceeding.

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Interpreters of this passage would do well to begin by using the text as a mirror to see whether they find their own reflection in it. Paul's call to self-scrutiny should be taken with the utmost seriousness. Our habit of thinking of ministry as a "profession" is likely to produce serious distortions in our conception of the church and our role within it. Are we using the church as though it were ours, or as though it were an instrument for the advancement of our own careers or causes? If so, we need to be reminded that the church belongs to God, and that it is *God's* project, not ours. Are we treating church-building as a business or a competitive sport? If so, we are boasting in something other than the gospel. (I have been to enough United Methodist Conference meetings to know that this temptation is not merely hypothetical, and I suspect that the same is true in other ecclesial communities). Are we proud of our superior learning and intellectual ability? If so, we had better prepare ourselves to be shown foolish by God. Are we trying to build the church with clever management techniques and psychological insights? If so, we need to be reminded that no foundation can be laid other than Jesus Christ and that currently "relevant" building materials may quickly be shown to be ephemeral. Before trying to preach on this passage, in other words, the interpreter should linger long over it, listening for the divine word of judgment on him- or herself.

Having done that, however, we need to ask how this text can become a word for congregations as well. This is, after all, part of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church as a whole, not just to the leaders. What does this part of the Corinthians' mail have to say to our churches?

First of all, the whole church must be reminded that the church is God's project. This has several implications, but prominent among them is that we cannot define the aims or agenda of the church. That has already been done for us in Jesus Christ. Our pet projects and jealously guarded areas of special responsibility within the community are only chores assigned us by God. We could with no advance notice receive different orders or be required to turn our task over to someone else, just as Paul had to turn the "watering" of the Corinthian church over to Apollos and others. Whether it is the church school program or the soup kitchen or the choir or the budget committee or the planning of worship, we cannot claim ownership of any part of the church's ministry. God is in charge, and that is likely to mean that the church will grow and change in ways impossible to determine ahead of time. If we resist that and try to maintain personal control we may divide the community and incur the judgment of which Paul warns.

Second, the passage contains an urgent call for the unity of the church. All our denominational and intradenominational divisions are in the last analysis simply silly; where squabbles persist, it is a sure sign that we are putting human wisdom and human boasting in the way of God's design to build a unified community. We are acting as though the various churches were franchise operations like McDonald's and Burger King and Wendy's, each hustling for a market share. But by dividing God's building we are endangering its capacity to stand. Anyone preaching on this text should ask the congregation to sing the hymn "The Church's One Foundation" and insist on singing, not omitting, the verse that laments the state

of the church: “by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.” Bible study groups discussing this passage should be encouraged to reflect on direct and practical ways of working toward Christian unity within and among churches.

Third, the congregation should be invited to reflect on the image of the church as the temple in which God’s spirit dwells. This is for Paul not merely a casual metaphor; it is an experiential reality. What would it mean for our communities to think of themselves in these terms? (a) It would mean that we urgently need to gather to experience God’s presence. (b) It would mean that we are called to reflect seriously on how to be a *holy* community. This is an idea that many church members at the end of the twentieth century find distinctly unsettling. But if it really is true that the Spirit of God is present in our midst, we must ask how our lives should be ordered to give reverent honor and glory to God. The very fact that such language may sound strange to our ears—as perhaps it did to the Corinthians—is a measure of how profoundly we need to rethink our lives in light of the gospel. Just as the Corinthians had to be resocialized into the new symbolic world of the gospel, so it is with us as well. (c) Finally, to understand our community as the temple in which the Spirit of God lives would encourage us to open ourselves to the possibility of manifestations of the Spirit in our midst. As we shall see in later chapters, such manifestations proved problematical for the Corinthians; this problem will be dealt with at the appropriate point in the text, but let us simply observe for now that problematical manifestations of the Spirit are better than *no* manifestations. Because the church has become so rigid and has squeezed out the life of the Spirit, we now find people in Western culture searching about outside the church in all manner of specious speculations and occult practices, seeking to get in touch with some reality that transcends our closed and boring rationalistic vision of reality. This is a bitter and strange denouement for a community, the church, whose powerful evangelistic appeal in its time of origin was grounded in its experience of the living presence of God outside the channels of institutional religion. God is still present in our midst. We should loosen up and let God’s power work among us.

Fourth, this text speaks a word of judgment on those whose actions compromise the church’s integrity or destroy its unity. Our resistance to hearing and preaching about God’s judgment is comically symbolized by the fact that lectionary committees have decided to recommend that when this passage is read in worship, verses 12–15 should be omitted! (We will encounter this same phenomenon with other judgment passages later in the letter.) This is irresponsible avoidance of the message of the text. The cure for abuse of the text is not avoidance but better exegesis. Teachers and preachers should read and deal with the full passage, making clear that it is *not* about “purgatory” or about individuals but about the church’s structural wholeness; at the same time, we should emphasize that the passage portrays a God who will not tolerate pride and divisiveness. Judgment and grace are inseparable elements of the whole biblical message. Without the reality of judgment, there would be no grace at all, but only benign divine indifference.

Fifth and last, the passage’s conclusion points again to the cosmic scope of the gospel message. The God whom we worship rightly claims us because he is the creator and Lord of the universe. Because we are in Christ, we participate in the reality of God’s dominion and therefore are set free from anxiety and petty scrambling for human approval. Paul and Apollos and Cephas here (v. 22) symbolize any group allegiances that trick us into groveling around before human authorities or trying to manipulate people into joining our party. We all belong to God; if we believed that and acted on it, it would simplify our lives enormously—and, at the same time, heal our divisions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hays, R. B. (1997). *First Corinthians*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (Page 61). Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press.

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Here are some more discussion questions that might be helpful:

- When founding and guiding numerous congregations, Paul urged them to remember that the body of Christ has many members with many varied and wonderful gifts. Paul teaches that all of us are to serve the community in unity and harmony, but he also knew that we are all pretty different people. Some of us are equipped to teach, some are equipped to build budgets, some are leaders, and still others are equipped to be especially caring and supportive of those in crisis. How do we discover the individual gifts that God has given each of us? How do we go about finding the places in the church where we can best serve?
- We live in a very achievement-oriented community and many of us come from professions filled with hierarchies of power and knowledge. In the church, there are no hierarchies of service - one way of serving the church is not spiritually superior to another. Paul says, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." (1Cor 12:4-6) Do you find this hard to really accept? Is our seeming need for hierarchy a barrier to service? Or is it a lack of confidence? Or a lack of training? How do we overcome this?