

Building God's Church

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[0 : 0 0] Well, friends, I'm going to lead off with a question today. It's at the top of your outline. And the question is, do leaders matter? So if you ask former Prime Minister Paul Keating, remember this guy? Yep. He would say yes. He had a famous quote which said, if you change the government, you change the country.

Now, of course, he would say that because he said it in 1996 as he was desperately trying to cling on to government with John Howard in the election coming after him. And yet you have to say, if you look at all the prime ministers that have come since, maybe one or two did make a difference. But did all of them really made a difference? You don't have to answer that if you don't want to.

And also look at the news because there's an obsession, isn't it, with talk about leadership, whether it's politics, business or sport. People are always talking about changing leaders, you know, who so and so is now the leader or the CEO or whatever.

And the presumption is that people think that organizations succeed or fail based on who is in charge. Well, this morning, we're going to tackle a similar but actually more important question. And the question is the second one on the outline. Do church leaders matter?

And the answer, I think, is found in today's passage. In the first part, we'll find that Paul says that leaders don't matter. They don't matter because God is building the church.

[1 : 3 1] And Paul gives three quick points to demonstrate why. First, from verse 1 to 5, Paul says leaders don't matter because they are merely God's servants assigned to their task by God.

So Paul writes from verse 1, Now, remember the context here, which we've been looking at for the last few weeks. They've been quarreling among themselves about their leaders. And Paul says this is simply childish.

He calls them mere humans, which means they are unspiritual, not of the spirit. It's like, for example, some of you here saying, you know, we follow Andrew Price because we were with him when they, you know, we first started the 4 p.m. service.

Our loyalties to him. To which another says, no, no, we're following Vijay because he's our Bible study leader and he calls us every week. Do you? I don't know. Anyway. Well, thankfully, this sort of thing doesn't happen here.

But if Paul were among us, he would say, you fools. Vijay and Andrew are simply servants doing his task, God's task. In fact, that's what he says in verse 5.

[3 : 0 5] What after all is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord has assigned to each his task. Paul's saying, don't give these leaders the credit for your faith.

Give God the credit instead. Secondly, Paul now says in verse 6 and 7, although Paul and Apollos each have their part, ultimately, it's only God that makes things grow.

So verse 6, I planted a seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow.

Twice, Paul says, it's God who makes things grow. Nothing grows without God, no matter how good the leaders are. And that's been the case since the beginning of time, since the beginning of history.

All good things in this world only come from God's hand. That's why we had that reading in Genesis this morning, when God made a covenant with Abraham, he himself accomplished, he said that he would accomplish what he promised to do for Abraham.

[4 : 17] So I've got the verses again underlined. I will make you exceedingly fruitful. I will make you into nations. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant.

I will give you the land of Canaan. And so it is with God's church as well. No one here believes in Jesus except by God's power working in you.

Even as we look at the Bible, no one understands the things of God except by the Spirit. No one grows in their faith. No one comes to God except for God's power working in them.

So yes, Andrew, Vijay, myself, we still have the task of teaching and preaching God's word. But unless God's the one that opens your eyes to his word, you, me, will never understand anything or change or grow.

That's why I think I encourage you. I know you're all busy, but as Vijay says, come to Kingdom Growth Night. Come and pray, not just for your leaders, but for everyone who teaches, even the Sunday school leaders or the youth leaders, because unless God is working through them, your children will not grow.

[5 : 34] Unless the Spirit is working in their hearts, no one grows. Thirdly, in verses 8 to 9, Paul then says, leaders don't matter.

That is, there's no point backing one leader over the other because they're all working together anyway as co-workers in the same team and on the same project. It's like the footy team.

You know, if you had team members fighting against each other, competing, they're not going to win, are they? In the same way, Paul is saying that he and Apollos are working for the same goal.

So verse 8, the one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their labor. For we are co-workers in God's service. You are God's field, God's building.

And that's why I like it when the Chinese congregations, they actually call their leaders co-workers because they understand this very concept. They see themselves as working together for the same God, in the same field, for the same purpose.

[6 : 38] Christian ministry is not a competition. It's a collaboration between all of God's workers. And Andrew, Vijay, and myself, and all of you, we are all working together to build God's church here at Holy Trinity.

And so ultimately, who specifically is your pastor of your congregation doesn't matter because God is building His church.

And yet, right in the very next breath or verse, as Paul moves on from the image of the field to the building, and without any sense of contradiction, Paul also says that leaders do matter.

Leaders do matter because God is building His church through leaders. Not just through them, but importantly, through them. So, he's making the point that the specific leader doesn't matter, but the type of leader that leads the church matters.

So look with me at verse 10 to 11. Paul says that leaders matter because what they do makes a difference. Paul writes, By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it.

[7 : 55] But each one should build with care, for no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. So, without taking any credit away from God and His grace, Paul nevertheless is unabashed to call himself a wise builder.

Paul is saying, what I do matters. I know what I'm doing, my skills and my knowledge, they make a difference. And in the case of the church in Corinth, Paul had that important task of laying the foundation, which is really the most important thing about any building, any good building.

And so here, he warns those who follow after him. I take it that he means everyone who builds, but specifically for leaders as well, he warns them to build with care.

Otherwise, the building that rises up will be at risk. Now, what does Paul mean by Jesus as the foundation? Now, some may say it refers to Christ's work on the cross itself.

You know, his death, by which he becomes the penal substitute and no one is saved but through his death. Now, I think that's obviously true. That's what the gospel is.

[9 : 07] But I don't think that's what Paul means here. Because he talks actually about his own work of laying that foundation. And so, if he's just talking about the work of Jesus on the cross, then Paul has no part in that.

Rather, I think Paul is referring to his related work of preaching and proclaiming the message of the cross. I mean, he's already said in the start of chapter 2, at the start, that he resolved to do nothing while in Corinth except to preach Christ and him crucified.

So, this is the gospel work which actually founded the church. And Paul is now afraid that others that come after him might build carelessly upon that foundation.

What these leaders do after him matters, he says, because they will make a difference to the church that is being built. Now, he's not here talking about Apollos or Cephas.

They're no longer there. But he's talking about the leaders that are still present in the church and leading the church. And this is all serious stuff because as we now look at verse 12 and 13, it's so serious that God will judge their work and there will be eternal consequences.

[10 : 19] He says, if anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, and costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, their work will be shown for what it is because the day will bring it to light.

It will be revealed with fire and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. Now, if you've ever played with fire as a kid, does anyone care to admit that?

No? Oh, there's a few. Yes, I'm one of them too. You will know how easily wood, hay, and straw burns, right? Whereas, gold, silver, and costly stones don't.

Now, I never actually had any gold to throw into the fire. My mom kept all the jewelry, so thankfully. But those who build with gold and silver, Paul says, will be rewarded on the day of judgment.

But not so those who build with wood, hay, and straw. Verse 14 and 15, If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved, even though only as one escaping through the flames.

[11 : 27] Now, as I read this, here's the sobering thought for me. Because, Paul here isn't talking about builders that are false prophets and teachers. People that we know that are not Christians.

He's actually talking about genuine believers as builders, isn't he? Because, he says that they'll be saved despite their poor building. So, these people are actually ones who understand and believe the gospel.

They are the ones that think that they are truly serving the Lord. Only to discover in the end that actually what they've all done is just going to go up in flames. And so, you know, based on our first point, on the one hand, leaders don't matter because we shouldn't idolize them and follow them from church to church as I know some people do.

And yet, on the other, we do need to be discerning, don't we, when we choose leaders for the church. Not just the head pastor, but all the other leaders as well. And we do need to be discerning when we choose the types of church we belong to based on the leaders that they have.

Because, there are cases where even if the leaders are true Christians, even if, in the past, the church was laid on a foundation of Christ, yet, what their present leaders and church members are doing may be just building with hay and straw.

[12 : 57] So, the question becomes, how do we tell that what is being built will survive or not? Well, the short answer is that, is that, we can tell by seeing that they, if they continue to build in the same way that the foundation was laid.

In other words, is the message of the cross still being taught and proclaimed? Paul says already in 1 Corinthians 1 and verse 18, which I'll put the verse back up and that's something you looked at a few weeks ago.

He says that this is the only message that has the power to save, the message of the cross. And so, as we look at our church and look at other churches, the way to judge it is to see whether the people that are being led, are they still coming to and growing in faith?

Do we see them doing this as they are being taught the word of God, being taught the gospel of Christ? Because only those with a genuine faith in Jesus, those are the only ones that will remain when the test of fire comes at the end.

So friends, I do not presume to know what's in your hearts, but just going to church, just being part of the fellowship, just doing good deeds alone, these are all mere wood and hay to God.

[14 : 25] And so, if there's anyone here today who is just going through the motions of church, then can I please urge you, don't deceive yourselves. Turn to Christ in genuine repentance and faith.

Come to Him and grow in Christ. God is saying God is saying that our work will not be judged by how many mouths we feed, how many people we've clothed, but by the faith of the people that we minister to.

Our job as a church is not to make better citizens in this country, good as that may be. Our job is not to help them live more fulfilled lives in this world, again, good as that may be.

No, our main goal is to nurture their faith in Jesus, to feed them the word of God so that they may grow. Now, don't get me wrong here, I'm not saying we don't do any of those other things.

Those are good things and we need to do them. But they're not the primary goals of the church and they shouldn't be certainly done at an expense of the gospel of Christ.

[15 : 42] And that's why we have as our church mission, which is on the front of your bulletins, to gather and grow in Christ. How? By proclaiming and promoting God's word in love.

For us who are pastors, that's our bread and butter, that's what we need to do every week. But all of us actually have a role in doing that. Speaking the truth in love to each other.

Promoting, praying, giving, supporting. So that we're all involved in this main goal of building God's church on the right foundation. And that is the cross of Christ.

And so leaders in church matter because they set the tone, they set the priorities, they direct the resources to make sure that these things happen. And while God in His mercy, you know, He can make anything grow even through our failures.

But the warning here is Paul saying to us and particularly to leaders, we will be answerable for what we do, whether we build with gold or we build with hay.

[16 : 47] And for the church at Corinth, their failure was because they were quarreling and they were asking their members to trust in human leaders, Paul, Apollos, whoever, instead of trusting in God.

Now, we too have our dangers, don't we? Because we can, as well as a church, turn people's attention away from Jesus and onto other church-related or churchy things which we think are more important.

So it's such an encouragement to hear Paul just say with his testimony that he was turned back to the Bible, to Jesus, when at first in church all he knew were some of these churchy things.

But there are other sort of risks, aren't there? We could, for example, make spiritual gifts, all of us trying to find our spiritual gifts as the obsession or the main focus of church.

Or, as some want to say, to help each individual find their calling in life, to find their fulfillment in life. Now, again, those are all good things but that is not the focus of church.

[17 : 56] Neither is feeding the poor, neither is championing one particular cause of the downtrodden. And sadly, sometimes, church, the focus of church can be turned away to the wrong things as well because of the leader.

Where leaders are just trying to build up their own empires. Have you heard and read on websites about how a certain individual has this special prophetic ministry or God-ordained powerful healing ministry?

ministry? That's all turning people away from Jesus, isn't it? And onto individuals. Unless you think that that will never happen at HTD, please don't do that because all it takes is for the tenure of one pastor to turn a strong and faithful church that builds on gold and silver into one that builds with wood and hay.

I'm not saying it's happening at Holy Trinity, but I've seen it happen at other churches. And when that happens, brothers and sisters, it grieves God greatly.

Because as we now see in our third and final point, what really matters to God are not the leaders but His church. So verse 16, Paul says, Do you not know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in your midst?

[19 : 19] If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is sacred and you together are that temple. Now notice it's saying there that it's not you individually but not even you the leaders but you together, all of us, are that temple.

And if you read through the Old Testament, God's temple, that symbol, has always been the focal point of God's people. temple, this is the place where God has chosen to make His dwelling.

As it were, that's the place where heaven and earth meet. And we know that in Christ, that's been fulfilled in Him, hasn't it? Jesus is God's temple but as Christ's body, the church is also that temple as Paul says.

God has poured out His spirit on us so that the spirit dwells among us. And so can you see why that is God is so jealous for His church?

It's not the leaders but it's the church that is God's pride and joy. It's the very thing that He has washed by the blood of His Son. And that's why do you not think it reasonable that He would judge severely those who seek to destroy the church?

[20 : 40] Of course He would, wouldn't He? Now that's very different, isn't it, to the way the world thinks. Because you see, the world looks up to its leaders, don't they?

That's the only reason why I think that they pay CEOs a hundred times or a thousand times more than the ordinary worker. Are they worth that much more? Apparently they are because they're leaders.

That's why we see when world leaders go from one country to another, people are just at their back and core because the leaders are the ones that are important. And everywhere you look, maybe even in the organizations that you work for, sometimes it seems that the organization is there to serve the leaders and their interests, not the other way around.

But that's not the way with God and that's not the way with church because God's main interest is not to build the ministry of leaders. It's not to build Andrew's ministry or my ministry or Vijay's ministry.

No, his main focus is to build his church. And he would raise leaders and some of them would be very gifted and some of them would be very prominent but all these leaders merely serve to build God's church.

[21 : 54] It's an upside down hierarchy. Does that make sense? So Paul now ends in verse 18. He says, do not be deceived. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, that is, if you are thinking like the world, then you should become fools so that you may become wise.

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. All this boasting about human leaders, that will come to nothing, Paul says. Instead, verse 21, he goes on to say that actually the leaders are there for your benefit.

Yes, they are God's servants, but they are also your servants, the church's servants. Just as with everything else in life, all things are yours.

Whether Paul or Cephas, or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all things are yours. What a wonderful, isn't that a wonderful thing?

All things exist for the church's benefit, even the leaders. Now, why is that? Are we that great? No. All things exist for us because we are of Christ.

[23 : 05] We belong to Christ. It is for the church that Jesus died for. And finally, Christ is of God. That is the true hierarchy. God, Christ, the church, and then leaders serving the church.

Now, friends, you were probably not around at that time, but about 165 years ago, a small group of Christians laid a foundation for God's church right here in Doncaster.

Now, most of us will probably know any of their names anymore. We do know one name. It's the family, the Pickering family. That's why we've named the Pickering room after them in their honor.

But the first church meeting of Holy Trinity Doncaster was in their living room. Now, I can't vouch for every leader since then, but throughout the years, God has built His church here in Doncaster.

And He has raised up leaders to do that, to build with gold, silver, and precious stones. In fact, I said to some of the people at 745 and 9, and maybe some here as well, that some of them were these very leaders, and some of them still are.

[24 : 19] And some of them would have built with care. Now, how do we know that? Because we can see the evidence of it today, right now, right here. We have a thriving church that loves Jesus.

We still preach and teach the Bible. We have still people coming to faith, don't we? Now, if you ask them then, 165 years ago, what their church would be like today, I don't think that they would have imagined what it has become.

Seven services on a Sunday. Thankfully, the thing not in my living room, sorry. Hundreds of Chinese Christians, and many others across the world.

And yet, that's exactly what God has done, year on year, faithfully building his church through his faithful leaders and members. Now, assuming Christ doesn't come again for another 150 years, I want you to imagine what church would be like here in 150 years.

What do you think it would be like? Well, I'm pretty sure none of the members then would know our names, probably. If they wandered up the back where the organ is and they looked through the photos of the vicars, they might see, Andrew's not here because he was embarrassed when I said this, they might see a picture of a handsome young man with the words Reverend A. Price under it.

[25 : 46] I did tell him to take his photo now instead of waiting 20 years if he's still around. But hopefully, what is more important is that they would still find a church vibrant and growing.

A church that's still faithful to the foundation of Jesus. A church that's still teaching and preaching the gospel. And all because each of us right now, especially the leaders, are continuing to build God's church with care.

And as I said earlier, it's not just the leaders but all of us, we are all called to play a part, aren't we? Whether it's big or small, what we do now will make a difference, whether for good or for bad.

And no one will remember then what we did. And that's fine because God will. And God will test the quality of our work. and I'm praying that for all of us, He will find that the work that we've done stands and there reward us for that work.

So friends, let me encourage you to join in this work. Many of you are already doing that. But join in whatever way you want. If you're not sure, I'll talk to Vijay or myself. Join in in building God's church here together.

[27 : 09] Let us give thanks for the faithful leaders that have come before us, that have done just that. And let us keep praying that God will raise up faithful leaders for the years to come.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for giving us leaders, not so that we can follow them, but so that your church can be built up for your glory.

Help those of us who are leaders not to focus on building a name for ourselves or a ministry for our own glory, but help us to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ, to build with gold, silver, and costly stones.

And we pray, teach us to encourage others to grow in their faith, grow in their obedience to God's word, and to persevere until the day of the Lord.

We ask and pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.