Forward Goal, Not Backward Obsession

Imagine driving a car primarily by looking at the rear-view mirror rather than looking straight ahead. What a disaster that would be. Often we are tempted to conduct ministry by such an approach, worrying about what others are thinking of our past “performances.” While it is good to hear wise counsel, the apostle Paul shows us in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 the dangers of allowing one’s ministry to be evaluated as though it were a popularity contest.

Those to whom we minister are not our employers. If they were, we would be tempted to compromise our proclamation of the gospel to suit their tastes. As it was, Paul, Cephas, and Apollos—three personalities over whom the Corinthians had divided—were all “assistants of Christ and household slave-managers of the mysteries of God” (4:1). They were to be evaluated not according to how charismatic they were in their speech or how knowledgeable they were about heavenly... Continued on back page
mysteries that did little to transform lives.

The one standard by which God and Christ were evaluating them was this: Were they “faithful”? (4:2). In other words, did they teach the truth of the gospel accurately, without dilution? Did they focus on expounding that core truth of “Christ crucified” for the world? And did their lives illustrate that core teaching by behaving faithfully amidst hardship, giving praise to God for his power operating in their weakness?

Even Paul’s own estimation of how he was doing was of little consequence relative to the approval of God. “I do not even examine myself, for I am conscious of nothing against myself—but not in this have I been exonerated. The one who examines me is the Lord” (4:3b-4).

In a later letter, Paul, using the metaphor of an athlete, defined his goal as “knowing Christ” and being “conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead…. Forgetting the things behind and stretching out toward the things ahead, I am in pursuit toward the goal” (Phil 3:10-14).

May we likewise keep our eyes on this “prize of God’s calling above in Christ Jesus” and take our eyes off of an obsesive-compulsive need to be approved by ungodly people.

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“And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile (Apokatallaso) all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.”

Colossians 1:20

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