10.05.2012
PURSUIT OF MATURITY

When writing to the church at Corinth the apostle Paul set out to address several areas of concern, all of which reflected on that vibrant and charismatic congregation's need to **mature spiritually**. They were in dire need of decontamination from the destructive pagan cultural influences of their day. After dealing with a few of the key issues, Paul continued that process with this corrective found in 1Corinthians4:15-17(NKJV) *"I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel."*

This verse is generally used as proof text for what has become known as the 'fathering movement' which concerns itself with the plight of many believers and ministry leaders who are in a sense spiritual orphans, owing to the fact that they may have never had the privilege of being discipled and mentored, leaving them with a deep sense of insecurity. They were, in all likelihood denied the experience of being spiritually nurtured through formative relationships with spiritual 'parent/ father figures' like Paul, Apollos [1Corinthians 4:6a,17] and older siblings like Timothy to whom they were accountable, and who, on their part, took responsibility for their spiritual foundations and maturity. And while this aspect of 'fathering' would obviously have been a vital part of the message that Paul wished to convey, it certainly was not his sole focus.

While he dealt with the importance of the relationship of the Corinthian church to himself as a spiritual 'father', he also addressed another problem namely, their **inappropriate relatedness** to those who were merely "instructors" or spiritual **service providers**; they who appeared to demand a level of commitment and loyalty which were rightly owed only to 'parents' and 'family', in a manner of speaking. Therefore he points to the moral inappropriateness and the inherent dangers of that disorderly arrangement, which, as referred to earlier, exhibits a perturbing immaturity on the part of the Corinthians and their accompanying inability to fully appreciate the importance and value of spiritual family.

When the trust and dependency which is natural and desirable for a child towards its parents are replaced by an overly passionate commitment to 'service providers' which the child perceives as popular or glamorous, ahead of a loyalty to and trust of family, there is certainly cause for concern - especially where this infatuation is associated with a strong desire to emulate these new role models. This tendency of course displays a lack of a mature judgement - reducing the child to the vulnerabilities of the proverbial orphan. Paul therefore admonishes the church to focus on God's design to mature them, namely, by means of **impartation** which occurs only within the context of real, not virtual, relationships. While outsiders may provide welcome inputs of information, motivation and inspiration, spiritual **maturity comes mainly through impartation**, that is, through **life-on-life value transmission within an established community of believers**.

It is quite alarming to witness the growing number of people who assume that they could grow spiritually by feeding off virtual relationships with people and ministries in which there is not even a remote possibility of relationship. In other words there is no opportunity to cultivate Godly, **mutually edifying commitments** in which **mutual trust** is borne out of **life-sharing, mutual accountability and transparency**. In the process they develop unauthentic spiritual personas as they attempt to emulate human icons which, over time, tend to become Christ-replacing idols. This condition inevitably gives rise to spiritual pride. Therefore Paul admonishes us all to rather 'imitate' or emulate those people whom we truly know instead of those whom we may aspire to know.

In John10:10-13 Christ introduces Himself as the consummate measure of **pastoral care**. He shares his view of its ultimate purpose, that is, of leading us as sheep into a here-and-now experience of His abundant life. *"The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep." (NKJV)* With this in mind Christ makes the distinction between the protective, sacrificial pastor who is present in times of difficulty and pain - when real life happens - as opposed to the 'hireling' or '**service provider**' whose relationship in a relative sense, amounts to nothing more than a **contract** with the sheep who is then reduced to a hapless 'consumer' of a ministry contribution or product. Typical of this contract is a *"business arrangement for the supply of goods or services at a fixed price"* [Merriam-Webster Dictionary]. Inasmuch as a lust after 'an abundance of material things' [Luke12:15] does not make for 'abundant life', the desire for ministry imput by way of contractual arrangement, namely printed, electronic and social media or even ministry events can at best be a poor substitute for authentic impartation.

We have in many ways become an adulterous generation. A culture awash with pornography has literally and figuratively corrupted our relational sensibilities. These days it is considered good practice, even among conservative Christians, for instance, to attempt to supplement our marital intimacy with fantasies about idealized others instead of taking the time to learn to truly value and prize the spouse we have been blessed with. This same sin gets imparted to our youth who follow after, and fantasize about idealized role models outside the family. I sense a real urgency to admonish us all to discern and desist from this perverse behaviour. **We cannot continue to place the ministry contribution of a distant author, television or social media personality, or a para-church organisation above the faithful pastoral oversight and witness of accountability partners, small group or ministry-team leaders and spiritual parents within our spiritual home**. What starts as gullible immaturity invariably ends up as idolatry and ultimately as apostasy.

2Corinthians11:4-6(MessageBible) *"It seems that if someone shows up preaching quite another Jesus than we preached - different spirit, different message - you put up with him quite nicely. But if you put up with these big-shot "apostles", why can't you put up with simple me? I'm as good as they are. It's true that I don't have their voice, haven't mastered that smooth eloquence that impresses you so much. But when I do open my mouth, I at least know what I'm talking about. We haven't kept anything back. We let you in on everything"*. Holding before them the issue of appropriate relatedness to himself as their spiritual father, as a key to authentic spiritual growth and maturity, Paul goes on to urge the church to 'follow him as he follows Christ'. Do note the three very important issues which Paul places the searchlight for discernment on - Firstly which **Spirit image of Christ** is portrayed and projected? Secondly, is it a **counterfeit anointing** operating, or is it authentic [1John2:27(NIV)]. Thirdly, is the **message biblical** in its thrust and balance?
[Luke4:18-19]

[1Corinthians4:16;11:1;Hebrews 6:12]

Pastoral oversight carries with it considerable moral implications. Shepherds who shirk their responsibilities in this regard are certainly courting censure and discipline from the Chief Shepherd. Ezekiel34:4-5,10(NKJV) *"The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered."*

Hebrews13:17(AMP) *"Obey your spiritual leaders and submit to them [continually recognizing their authority over you], for they are constantly keeping watch over your souls and guarding your spiritual welfare, as men who will have to render an account [of their trust]. [Do your part to] let them do this with gladness and not with sighing and groaning, for that would not be profitable to you [either]."*

Scripture is very clear on the fact that the sheep have a moral obligation too, i.e. to recognise, respect and honour the authority and burden of shepherds to guide, provide, protect and nurture them. Therefore shepherds are constrained to live by **principles** based on a **parental prerogative to 'rather be safe than sorry'.**

* **<u>The Door Principle</u>**

This speaks of the importance of **protocol**, which refers to a 'code of correct conduct'; and **etiquette**, which refers to 'rules governing socially acceptable behaviour'. Jesus addresses the importance of these two issues in John10:1-2(NKJV) *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep."* This,

for our purposes, refers to that awkward moment when a dad has to forbid his daughter from having any contact with the young man who shows little respect for protocol by not first making an appointment with him as father to ask him for his permission to visit his daughter; or the young man who is indifferent to etiquette by insisting on visiting with her through her bedroom window instead of at the front door. Pastoral oversight is guided by the same rule of thumb by which to discern who might be a "thief, robber or wolf". God remains committed to Divine order, and so should we. [1Corinthians14:33,40] Para-church ministries who, as a rule do not consider and consult with pastoral oversight before soliciting commitment from members or who do not approach members through official channels, i.e. through the leadership, are to be viewed with suspicion.

* **House of Prayer Principle**

Jesus cleansed the temple on two separate occasions, namely at the beginning, and toward the end of His earthly ministry. He intervened vehemently to see it restored as a 'house of prayer for the nations' instead of it being a 'house of merchandise' or a 'den of robbers' [John2:16-17;Matthew21:13(AMP)]. I do believe He would be doing the same cleansing exercise in this closing chapter of the church age. The 'hireling', the 'thief' and the 'robber' speak of increasing degrees of 'merchandising' or exploitation and extortion. It speaks of scenarios where ministry is offered at exorbitant costs and done in such a way as to create and perpetuate dependency. A parent would become suspicious if a basic dental procedure to remove an abscess becomes a six month long process of multiplied expenses. In Acts8:17-23 the Apostle Peter sharply rebukes Simon, a convert from the occult, striking him with blindness even, for his attempt to commit the 'sin of Simony' i.e., the practice of merchandising God's free gifts of grace.

* **The Hijack Principle**

2Timothy2:26(NIV) *"...and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil,* ***who has taken them captive to do his will****"* (emphasis mine). Here Scripture speaks of a true minister who gets commandeered by the powers of darkness to promote their wicked agenda by the lawless deployment of the legitimate ministry gifts, skills and platform of the minister. This works much like a large passenger jet plane that gets surreptitiously hijacked. As is the case with ministry, it could take quite a while before the change of destination and agenda becomes evident to the passengers and crew.

Matthew7:21-23(NKJV) *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"*. Here Christ warns that in these last days the evil one would focus his hijacking attempts at three specific areas of

ministry namely, the **prophetic**, the **deliverance** and the **supernatural/miracle** ministries. These ministries are 'taken captive' mainly by their "practicing lawlessness" i.e. their failure to honour God's demand for submission and accountability to spiritual authority within the Body of Christ and obedience to His Word and Spirit. Because these are indeed three vital areas of ministry, caution and discernment is all the more critical.

* **The Outcomes-Test Principle**

Hebrews13:7(AMP) *"Remember your leaders and superiors in authority [for it was they] who brought to you the Word of God. Observe attentively and consider their manner of living (the outcome of their well-spent lives) and imitate their faith..."* Scripture does not want us to be so mesmerised by the ministry gifts and contributions of others without us being equally careful to focus on what is more important to God, viz. the moral and relational integrity of the ones doing the ministry. [cf 1Timothy3:12(AMP); 1Corinthians13:1-3]. Jesus accentuates this principle in Matthew7:15-16,20(AMP) *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you dressed as sheep, but inside they are devouring wolves. You will fully recognize them by their fruits. Do people pick grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?".* The fact is, it is much safer to trust someone you have relationship with than one you have a distant admiration for. Only the emotionally immature will trust strangers and acquaintances more readily than family, even if the family may be geographically farther away. Parents therefore are obligated to remind their children to 'beware of strangers'. We are to love indiscriminately and unconditionally, but like Christ, we are to trust selectively. [John2:23-25(HCSB)]

* **The Name-and-Shame Principle**

At times Scripture is discreet in its warnings about 'wolves' in a generic sense, e.g. 2Corinthians11:13-15,19-20(NKJV) *"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works... For you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise! For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face."* And at other times the warnings were against dangers from within the ranks, from members even!

Acts20:29-30(NKJV) *"For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."* As was the case here in Ephesus, all healthy church growth will inevitably attract these dangers, unfortunately!

Romans16:17(HCSB) *"Now I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause dissensions and obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have learned.* ***Avoid them****."* (emphasis mine). Wolves refers to people in ministry who display a predatorily, callous ruthlessness. They are driven by a cold, loveless ambition to achieve personal goals which are usually spoken of in passionate spiritual terms such as 'vision, purpose and destiny' etc., all of which is in fact a religious façade for demonic doctrine and schemes.

Then there were times when Paul deemed it necessary to warn the church against persecution - even from fellow believers [Galatians4:28-31]. There were also times when he specifically named and shamed the people whom he needed to warn the church against, especially dogged persecutors and detractors. 1Timothy1:20(NKJV) *"of whom are* ***Hymenaeus*** *and* ***Alexander****, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme."* 2Timothy2:17(NKJV) *"And their message will spread like cancer.* ***Hymenaeus*** *and* ***Philetus*** *are of this sort."* 2Timothy4:14(NKJV) *"****Alexander*** *the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works."*

Therefore it is absolutely necessary for members to choose to trust their leaders when they, in similar vein, take precautionary measures and issue warnings, both generic and specific. And even at times when they cannot or may not divulge all the reasons. Obviously these principles apply mostly where a church is committed to the principle of family relationship, disciple-making and leadership development - which we at Shofar certainly are. May God help us as a movement to maintain our ranks as a safe, fruitful chapter of God's greater family.

With loving concern,

Fred.