

# A CONSTITUENCY OF ONE

## 1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-5

The [Rasmussen Daily Presidential Tracking Poll](#) is a survey of 1500 likely American voters. Every night respondents are reached by phone and online. The poll measures *the job approval rating* of America's president.

Pollsters ask citizens if they approve or disapprove of the president's performance. They even record if the voter ***strongly approves*** or ***strongly disapproves***.

All the numbers are rolled into a [Presidential Approval Index](#) that provides a gauge of overall opinion. It's a daily White House report card. *And presidents pay attention!*

National Journal says the following about this type of polling, ["Let's not kid ourselves. Since the advent of public opinion surveys, all presidents save Truman have been avid consumers of poll data. Nixon's advisers even stored polls in a safe. Polls are here, and they remain a valuable guide for gauging the pulse of democracy."](#)

Though public opinion polling might reveal ["the pulse of democracy,"](#) it can be the death knell for Christianity.

A pastor or church leader will be called on to say and do hard things. Following God is often *the path less traveled*. He has to keep his eyes on the One He's following, not those who are commenting on his journey.

Bible teacher, Alan Redpath, put it, “No man can lead a work of God if he allows himself to be governed by what other people think.” *Opinion polls are not our friend.*

Yet in 1 Corinthians 4 we find that Paul’s performance was being monitored by [The Church in Corinth’s Daily Tracking Poll](#). And his [Approval Index](#) was tanking... And here Paul tells them how much he cares... *not much!*

Certainly, Christian ministry needs to be engaged in conscientiously, and taken seriously. In fact, from the vantage point of eternity a minister’s performance is more strategic than a president’s, but it can’t be steered by people’s opinions. A US President serves 319 million people, but a Christian has **a constituency of One!**

In the first five verses of 1 Corinthians 4 Paul explains the motivation behind his ministry. He takes his cues from God alone, not the thinking of fallible people. And Paul’s attitude stands as an example to all Christians...

Let’s read our text - then we’ll look at it verse by verse.

Chapter 4 “**Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.**

**But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light**

the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts.

Then each one's praise will come from God.”

Paul tells us in verse 1, “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

This is not how the Corinthians had been *considering* Paul and the other men God had used to minister to this church. The Corinthians bought into a celebrity mindset.

In Corinth *the apostles met TMZ...* The Christians in Corinth were treating God’s servants like celebrities.

Remember, the Corinthians were Greeks. And Greeks were renown for their fables. They attached human traits to a mythological pantheon of gods and goddesses.

They lived vicariously through these demigods.

And we Americans do something similar through today’s pantheon of celebrities - musicians, actors, athletes, divas, reality show stars, even You Tube sensations - we turn people into *a special class* to whom we can attach our own unrealized hopes and dreams.

Realize, we’ve always had **heroes** - folks we look up to because of character and bravery. *Heroes are good.*

But today, we have **celebrities** - people who haven’t necessarily done anything brave or noble, but they entertain us and “*craft an image*” that attracts the public.

*And this isn't so good.* Often it leads to tragedy. The person assigned “*the celebrity status*” crashes under the pressure, and his or her fans end up disillusioned. Unlike “*hero*,” “*celebrity*” has very little to do with character.

And even Christians are guilty of this celebrity mindset. This is what happened in the Church at Corinth. Some were “*of Paul*,” others “*of Apollos*,” or “*of Peter*.”

All three of these apostles were legitimate **heroes**, humble men, but the Corinthians had turned them into **celebrities** and put them on a pedestal. Celebs are admired because they're intriguing, or hip, or make us laugh - that's fine - but the church is built on Christ!

Rather than follow the apostles' godly example, the Corinthians were using these men as wedges to divide.

They were forging petty allegiances to draw others into their camp, rather than recognize that the apostles were servants of Christ. *And Paul, one of those apostles, wanted nothing to do with fostering a celebrity status!*

This is why he goes to great effort to nip it in the bud.

Sadly, a lot of pastors will condemn celebrity culture in their teaching, while they enjoy it in actuality. They talk a good game, but act in ways that foster *a special class* to which they belong. Bring on the perks and privileges.

Here Paul helps the star-struck to re-*consider their leaders* - not as celebs, but as servants and stewards.

Verse 1, *“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ...”*  
He’s saying there’s nothing special about an apostle, or any Christian leader. We’re simply servants.

In fact, the word Paul uses for *“servant”* is not the common NT word for *“servant”* or *“doulos.”* It’s the word *“huperetes.”* *“Hupo”* means *“under.”* *“Retes”* is *“to row.”*

The term refers to an *under-rower* or *under-oarsman*.

Remember, Corinth was a Roman port. Paul and the Corinthians had seen their share of Roman galley ships.

The Roman fleet was propelled by slaves who were confined to the ship’s underbelly. They held the dry end of an oar. Their job was to row in cadence with the drum. Attack speed was faster. Ramming speed faster still.

There’s a famous scene from the classic movie, *“Ben Hur”* - that features a Roman ship powered by slaves.

Here’s a 20 second clip to help you get the picture.

And as you watch, notice the characters Paul could've pointed to as an example of Christian ministry... **(clip)**

Now when you compare Christian leadership with this clip - *where do you place the minister?* Where’s Pastor Waldo? Where in the picture is the godly leader?

Are Christian leaders like *the guys on deck* benefitting from the service of the hard-working people below? Is the leader, *the captain* who takes a seat so he can watch other people do the work? Is it *the committee member* standing in the back? Or is

the leader *the guy on the drum*, keeping the beat, and pushing people to do more?

Or is leadership *the guy with the whip*, disciplining the slackers? **The answer is... *none of the above!***

When Paul identifies Christian leadership is in this clip, he's clear. The man of God is the slave pulling the oar. Paul says, *"I'm an under-rower - a servant of Christ."*

*How revolutionary is this picture?* Paul says to the Corinthians, *"so consider us"* - not as celebrities or stars, but as oarsmen in a galley ship - servants of Christ.

**And did you notice these oarsmen...** They weren't worried about other ships and sailors at sea. They were oblivious to what else was happening around them.

Nor were they expert multi-taskers. The oarsman didn't wear lots of hats. His job was to grab an oar, and with that oar make a single stroke... time after time...

The rower didn't even have to set the pace. Cadence was not his responsibility. The speed was set by the Captain. *The oarsmen only had one job - pull in rhythm.*

This is the job of a church leader - a servant of Christ. My job - your job - is to take the oar the Lord has put in our hand - then hunker down - and learn to row together.

We shouldn't even be concerned about *how long we row*, or *how fast we go*. It's the Lord who sets the pace.

Our job is to stick with it - keep the beat. Maintain the same stroke week after week. God's call to ministry isn't even **"all**

hands on deck.” It’s “get below the deck” where no one can see you - grab an oar - and start to row.

If you want to be involved in ministry at any level, the entry level job... the middle level job... the upper level job... is that of *"servant."* God has never called anyone to be a *star*, or *celebrity*, or *sensation* - just a *servant*.

Pastor Romaine, was for years the Assistant Pastor at CC Costa Mesa. He use to tell young pastors, "Serve the Lord as if you're doing it in your underwear."

If you're wearing your skivvies you're not going to want people noticing you! The idea will be to serve the Lord - then get out of the spotlight. Be an under-rower.

And Paul adds, as *"stewards of the mysteries of God."*

A *"steward"* was a household manager. He was a slave to his master, but he was a master to his fellow slaves. He ran the household in his master's stead.

Needless to say, the steward needed to be trustworthy. He knew his master's heart and mind. He represented his master and carry out his wishes.

He managed the affairs as his master would. The steward had all the responsibility for his master's estate, *but without a sense of entitlement*. It wasn't for him to take liberties or award himself perks. He didn't just handled things as his own, *but better than his own*.

Author Robert Fulgham tells a great story. One day, his little



girl gave him a paper bag to take to work. When Fulgham asked what was in the bag, his daughter answered, "[Just some stuff. Take it with you.](#)"

At lunch that day, he pulled out the paper bag and poured out its contents. There were *two ribbons, three stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, used lipstick, two chocolate Kisses, and thirteen pennies...* Dad chuckled. He finished up his lunch, and swept everything off into the wastebasket.

But when he arrived at home that evening, his daughter asked him about the bag. "[Where is the bag, daddy?](#)" "I left it [at the office, honey, why do you ask?](#)"

His daughter answered, "[Well, those are my things in the sack, Daddy. The things I really like. I thought you might like to play with them. Now I want them back.](#)"

When his little girl saw Fulgham hesitate, she began to cry. "[You didn't lose the bag, did you?](#)" He assured her he hadn't. He would bring it home the next day...

But as soon as his daughter got to sleep, he raced back to the office to make sure he could retrieve the contents. Thankfully, Molly's valuables were still there.

He repacked the sack and returned home. Later, he had Molly tell him why each item was so important.

Fulgham writes, "[Molly had given me her treasures, all that a seven year-old held dear. Love in a paper sack. And I missed it. Not just missed it. I had thrown it away. Nothing in there I needed...](#) It wasn't the first or last time I felt like my



*"Daddy Permit" had run out.*

And to this Dad's surprise, days later Molly awarded him again. *Same bag. Same treasure.* Fulgham said he *felt forgiven*, and over the next few weeks considered it a prize whenever Molly gave him the bag.

Then one day, Molly gave him the bag and never asked for it back. She'd moved on to other treasures.

I'll let Robert Fulgham finish his story, *"It sits in my office still, left over from when a child said, 'Here. This is the best I've got. Take it. It's yours.'* I missed it the first time, but it's my bag now." Today, that bag is one of his treasures, but he had to learn to be a *steward*.

And this is how Paul defines a Christian leader. He or she is a *"steward of the mysteries of God."*

Our job is not to make stuff up. We don't invent or reinvent the message we preach to sync with opinion polls. We take the message that God gave us in His Word - *His mysteries* - and we handle them faithfully.

And if we love God we'll make sure all the items in His bag, stay in the bag - nothing gets neglected or lost. The Lord has told us why ever item is strategic...

There's *the mystery of the cross* - and *the mystery of the church* - and *the mystery of His coming*. 1 Timothy 3:16 tells us, *"Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in*

glory.” These all are the truths that we’ve been given to steward for our Master!

This is how Paul wants to be viewed by the Church at Corinth - not as a *celebrity*, but as “*servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*” Then in verse 2 he explains the goal of a good steward, “*Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.*”

Notice, he doesn’t say “*successful,*” but “*faithful.*”

Success is God’s business. And what form it takes is up to Him. Sometimes it’s tangible. Other times it’s spiritual. At times it’s evident. At other times it’s invisible. Sometimes it sprouts immediately. At other times it lies dormant for years and doesn’t blossom until much later.

If you make success your goal in serving Christ you’ll end up frustrated. Success in ministry can be elusive. It’s often a moving target. Our goal needs to be faithfulness!

We live in a world fascinated with the trappings of success. Even in Christian circles often the worth of a person's ministry is measured by *bucks in the bank, and buildings on the grounds, and buns in the seats.*

Often we let other people rob us of our joy in serving the Lord by imposing on us their measures of success.

*When will we learn you can’t always measure spiritual success by earthly criteria?!* You can have lots of numbers... nickels and noses... book deals, radio spots, lots of PR... and

still not be pleasing to God.

*Check out the Mormons...* They own half the state of Utah, yet they teach dangerous, damnable doctrine.

Don't be fooled. True success in ministry is marked by one quality - are you *"found faithful?"* Have you been obedient to what God called you to do?

In 1942, Clarence Jordan founded Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia. It was a place where blacks and whites could work together - a haven for racial unity.

In 1954, the Ku Klux Klan burned every building on the farm except Jordan's home. In the midst of the raid, Jordan recognized the voice of a newspaper reporter.

The next day, the same reporter came to do a story about the arson. The fire was still smoldering. When he arrived Clarence Jordan was in a field, planting seeds.

The reporter asked, *"I heard the news of the tragedy last night, and I came out to do a story on the closing of your farm."* Jordan just kept working the ground...

The reporter kept talking. Clarence said nothing...

Finally, the man asked, *"You have two PhD's, you've put 14 years into this farm, and now there's nothing left. Just how successful do you think you've been?"*

Suddenly, Jordan stopped hoeing, and told the reporter, *"You just don't get it, do you? You don't understand us Christians. What we're about is not success, but faithfulness."* Come what may, God has called every Christian to the

ministry of faithfulness.

In 79 AD, when the Italian, Mount Vesuvius erupted, it covered the city of Pompeii under a blanket of lava.

Years later when the ruins were excavated a Roman sentinel was found. His body had hardened in the lava, but he was still standing by his gate. In the chaos of the eruption the guard had held his post. A famous painting by Edward Poynter immortalizes the soldier.

The depiction is entitled, “Faithful unto Death.”

And like the sentinel, when the smoke clears, a good steward of Jesus is “*found faithful.*” This should be the goal of every Christian - *not celebrity, but fidelity.*

Rather than consult tracking polls... and watch the weather vein to see which way the wind is blowing...

Paul’s ministry was determined by his convictions.

His goal was to *serve the Lord Jesus* and *steward the mysteries of God.* Paul had a *constituency of One.*

And in verses 3-5 he explains how he handled the opinions and criticisms of the folks around him - *which were plenty.* Corinth had a [Pastor Paul Approval Rating](#). And because of the hard things Paul had to say to these Christians, they often *strongly disapproved.*

Thus, he says in verse 3, “*But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court.*” It was “*a very small thing*” to Paul to be judged by his peers,

but notice *it was a thing*.

Paul didn't dismiss the criticism outright. He thought it through. And this should be our practice. Seldom, do we receive criticism that's void of *any* merit. Even what comes from our harshest critic has an element of truth.

No one should be above criticism... Note, *who it is that's critical*. Note, *why it is they're critical* - but in every storm of criticism - amidst all the thunder and lightning generated - there're always a few raindrops of truth. No one should minister in a vacuum. Be open...

It reminds me of the pastor who was attacked time and time again by a vengeful, bitter woman in his church. Her loose lips were making his job unbearable.

One day he went to his dad for advice. Dad told him, "Son, here's what you should do. Whenever that gal starts to make your life miserable, drop to your knees, and pray, 'Lord, thank you that she's not my wife!'"

Hey, there's always a lesson to be learned!

The Pastor Paul Approval Index was "*a thing*" to be considered, but to Paul it was "*a very small thing*." He had learned to put very little stock in human opinions.

Folks are fickle. Trying to please people is like hitting a moving target. The bulls-eye is constantly changing.

Humans are swayed by *tradition, prejudice, bias, likes-and-dislikes, their own past experiences*. Every human sees through a thick fog that blurs their vision.

It's a rare person who's able to be truly objective.

Here's a question... *how much time do you spend worrying about what other people think of you?* Often we focus on opinions that have zero bearing on our God-given mission in life. **We just like being liked!**

In Galatians 1:10 Paul asked the believers in Galatia, "For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christ." In other words, you can't be a *people-pleaser* and a *God-pleaser* at the same time.

Jesus put it, "No man can serve two masters."

When the Corinthians accused Paul, *he considered the source*. They were carnal, immature. He didn't have a lot of confidence in their spiritual discernment; thus he wasn't afraid to disregard their opinion of him.

Paul justified his refusal to take heed to this church's criticism in three ways... **First**, in verse 3, "In fact, I do not even judge myself..." Why would Paul take to heart someone else's criticism, when he didn't even judge himself? *Paul wasn't afraid to cut himself some slack.*

On my very best day, if I wanted to find some sin in my life, it wouldn't take me long. It wouldn't be hard. *Like finding a rock in a rock pile, it'd be pretty easy.*

I'm a flawed vessel. I've got cracks and fissures everywhere. The only reason I still hold water is because the grace of God is keeping me together.



And like Paul, I've learned that rather than *rake myself over the coals*; it's better for me to *rest in God's grace*. Rather than *look inward*, Paul *looked upward*.

And I learned this the hard way. Years ago I ran with a group of Christians who were into **self-examination**.

They assumed it was super spiritual to spend lots of time and energy searching their heart for hidden sins.

And it didn't take much drilling before we hit oil. I was exploding geysers all the time. Yet all I proved was the truth of Jeremiah 17:9, **"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"**

Finally, it dawned on me that hyper-examination is not what the Bible teaches. This wasn't how Paul dealt with sin. Instead of *digging for sin*, Paul *reached for the heavens*. He focused on knowing Christ, and trusted the Lord to bring to light the flaws he should address.

Realize, **too much introspection causes dejection**.

Spend all your time **looking for sin**, and you'll have very little time left to **look to Jesus**. Faith grows when we get our eyes off ourselves and on to Him.

I love the story of Elisha's stew in 2 Kings 4. It would make a great episode of **Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives**.

Apparently, the ole boy picked up a poisonous herb and threw it in the pot. When he served it up, someone tasted it and shouted, **"There is death in the pot."**

And this is the problem with the whole human race.

Satan has interjected the poison of sin into the world. Sin now contaminates and spoils every aspect of life.

But notice, Elisha's solution wasn't to sift through the stew - pick out the poison. Instead, Elisha adds flour. It was the additive that neutralized and purified the stew.

*And this is Jesus' remedy for sin!*

Repent of your sin, sure - but once you do, start adding God's blessing to your life - *study His Word, enjoy His joy, taste His love, walk in His Spirit, lean on the fellowship of His Body* - get caught up in Christ!

Time spent trying to clean up your life is wasted time. The Bible teaches, **“Walk in the Spirit and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh.”** Paul is saying, rather than flush out my flaws, I choose to see myself in Christ.

But there's another reason Paul doesn't worry about what the Corinthians think of him. **“For I know of nothing against myself** (in essence, **“my conscience is clean”**), **yet I am not justified by this...**” Paul won't judge himself because *he doesn't trust his conscience.*

God created the conscience as a moral compass. It's a built-in tool to help us discern right from wrong - *true north.* But if it's wrongly calibrated it can deceive us.

Proverbs 14:12 issues a warning, **“There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”** In other words, we're vulnerable to blind spots.

Sin is like food stuck between your two front teeth - without a mirror, you're the last one to notice! Paul's conscience was clear, but a conscience can fool you.

Realize, the human conscience is a device with multiple inputs. Hopefully, it's informed by *the Bible*, but all too often it also gets trained by *tradition*, or *culture*, or *your upbringing*, or *a prejudice*, or by *lies and error*.

Recall in Antioch it was God's will for a Jewish Peter to lay aside his racial prejudice and eat with his Gentile brothers, but he didn't... *as a matter of conscience*.

But Paul had to stand up to Peter, and tell him that his conscience was wrong. This is what John writes about in 1 John 3:20, "For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things."

Just because our heart or conscience approves or disapproves, doesn't make a thing right. God ultimately trumps our heart. *He is greater than our conscience*.

Thus, Paul writes, "*I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this...*" His clean conscience might just be proof of his ignorance. This is another reason Paul's only judge was Jesus. He tells us at the end of verse 4, "But He who judges me is the Lord."

The opinions of other people are fickle.

Paul's own heart and conscience were fallible.

The only judgment Paul trusted was that of Jesus!

And the Lord Jesus has postponed most of His judgments until a specific time - a time yet future.

This is the third reason Paul didn't spend a lot of his day judging himself. It wasn't time yet for judgment.

God knew Paul was still learning and growing. The verdict on Paul was still out. *In fact, today the verdict on us is still being decided.* Thus Paul writes in verse 5, “**Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.**”

This means course corrections are still possible.

We're all building our eternity right now. You and I are a work in progress. Our future judgment can still be effected. Your life is not yet a wrap... your destiny is still not a lock... not until *you die* or *Jesus returns*.

In other words, there's hope!

And God doesn't want us sabotaged by a premature judgment... Don't tell someone they've got a good reward... *not yet!* They've still got time to get lazy.

Neither tell them, they'll beg in heaven... not when they still have an opportunity to lay up some treasure.

*A premature judgment - good or bad - can derail us.*

Paul had no idea how much time was left, but the whistle hadn't blown. And he was going to play hard until the game was over. When the clock is still ticking, it's not time to add up

the score, and declare a victor. To do so, as Paul said, is to *“judge... before the time.”*

Here’s an encouraging thought when it comes to our eternal rewards - **nothing has been decided yet!**

If you’re a Christian you still have time and space to make your life count and do something for Jesus’ sake.

There’s still a crown in your future - a reward from the Savior that you can give back to Him in praise.

The word *“shipwreck”* doesn’t get written over a life until the person whose life it is, crosses time into eternity. Before that moment, *all boats still float*. Your Christian life - your wasted years - are still salvageable.

God spoke by the Prophet Joel to His people, Israel, *“So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten...”* The locust were God’s judgment on the nation’s sin, but it wasn’t a final judgment.

If God’s people would return to Him with their whole heart, He was ready to restore them, and willing to do something great and gracious in their lives again.

I’m not sure you’ve noticed, but of all the judgmental people in the world no one is quite so quick to render a verdict as an *umpire!* These guys have got the nerve. They’re so haughty - calling folks out - ringing them up.

Of course, I’m being facetious. Judgment is an umpire’s job. And no umpire is perfect. Every ump blows a call, and makes

a mistake from time to time.

This is why I empathize with umps. The only time I get mad at an umpire is when he's out of position to make a call. He was too lazy to get himself in place.

And this is why Paul doesn't put much stock in current judgments - from other people. *The Corinthians were not in position to judge Paul.* They couldn't see the whole picture. They didn't know Paul's heart, or the circumstances he faced, or the pressure he was under.

And this is what makes our judgments so superficial. *Do we really know what that other person faces?*

*You can examine the fruit in my life. You can test my doctrine with Scripture...* But you don't know my heart's motivation. God hasn't made you *Soul Patrol*.

Only the Lord Himself has all the facts.

Years ago a couple came to me for pre-marital counseling. When it surfaced they were living together I insisted on the idea of an imposed separation.

I still believe if you want to do a relationship God's way, you'll start before you get married, not afterwards.

Yet as soon as I suggested the arrangement, the lady bolted from the room in tears... What I didn't know was a few days earlier the apartment the two were now living in, had been broken into, and she'd been raped.

Her boyfriend had moved in reluctantly. He was sleeping on



the couch to protect his fiancée. It was not what I'd assumed. I apologized to the couple for jumping to a conclusion, before I knew the whole story.

And that's the point, only Jesus knows *the whole story of every story...* And Paul tells us, it's not until He returns, that He'll "bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts..."

"**Then each one's praise will come from God.**" Based on our limited perspective, and how out-of-position we are for making such calls - *what if we started passing out eternal rewards today? We'd get it all wrong!...*

We'd exalt people the Lord is planning to humble. And we'd overlook folks He will richly reward. It's by avoiding these kinds of judgments - *and deferring them to Jesus* - that it'll all get sorted out right in the end...

In the meantime, be under-rowers of Christ - be stewards of God's mysteries... *and be "found faithful."*