



## Word Pictures for Christian Workers

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a word picture also has great value for those who study the Bible. These word pictures, called metaphors, can give us great insight into God's truth. Seven word pictures in 1 Corinthians 3 and 4 are especially helpful for those involved in Christian service. Here the apostle Paul is correcting the Corinthians' misconceptions about ministers of the gospel. Sometimes he uses an explicit metaphor, other times he suggests a word picture. From these we gain valuable insight into what it means to minister the gospel to God's people. Note that four word pictures concern the worker's relationship to others, and three concern the worker's relationship to God. We will address them in that order.

**The Christian Worker as a Parent.** In 3:1-2 the apostle Paul assumes the role of a spiritual parent. The motherly role is suggested as the one who feeds her children appropriately. Normally, a mother feeds younger children milk until they can handle solid food. Just as a mother feeds her children age-appropriate food, so the minister is responsible to feed people according to their spiritual capacities. The metaphor of a mother is also found in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8 where Paul wants his readers to understand how he gently nourished and cherished them while he imparted his life to them.

Likewise, 4:15 contains a comparison to the father. Here Paul suggests that since he has given spiritual birth to the readers, he is therefore attached filially and responsible for them spiritually. In 4:16 Paul urges them to 'imitate me.' The word imitate (*mimeomai*) is the root of our English word mimic, and suggests a child's tendency to mimic adults, especially parents. In this way, Paul assumes the fatherly role of a loving leader and example. In a similar metaphor in 1 Thessalonians 2:10-11, we see that the father's role includes giving exhortation, comfort, and guidance. The parent-like responsibility of the minister is therefore both loving care and leadership.

**The Christian Worker as a Servant.** In 3:5 Paul calls himself and Apollos 'ministers.' This designation comes from the word *diakoneō*, which means to serve, and was often used for waiting on tables (cf. John 12:2; Acts 6:2). This is an amazing word picture given the ancient Greeks' aversion to voluntary service to others. Paul used the term to describe himself again in 2 Corinthians 4:5 to make it clear that the central focus of his ministry was the preaching of Jesus Christ, not himself. He was merely a servant of God's will. Such humiliation of the Christian worker moves others to follow (cf. 16:15-16). It is leading by serving.

**The Christian Worker as a Gardener.** In 3:6 we find a word picture that evokes a gardener, or perhaps a farmer: 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.' This comparison is also self-effacing so that God gets the credit for the life-change in others. The gardener's role is simply to plant and cultivate what God causes to grow (v. 7). Though only instrumental, the minister's horticultural work is nevertheless important in God's ordained process for changing lives. Christians who work hard in the garden (or field) are rewarded for their labor (v. 8).

**The Christian Worker as a Builder.** Paul switches to an architectural metaphor in verse 10 where he compares himself to a 'master builder' who laid a foundation. The original noun, *architecton*, bears obvious similarity to the English counterpart. The builder's work is described by a word

*continued on back*



(*epoikodomeo*, vv. 10, 12, 14) that is used figuratively for strengthening or building up Christians (cf. Acts 20:32; Col. 2:7; Jude 20). The metaphor is used to emphasize the importance of pure methods and motives in ministry to others. A Christian worker can build in a worthy or unworthy manner. The day of testing will reveal the quality of his work (vv. 12-13) and God will reward accordingly (vv. 14-15). Every Christian worker should therefore 'take heed how he builds' (v. 10).

**The Christian Worker as God's Co-worker.** In 3:9 Paul calls himself and other ministers 'fellow workers.' The noun used is from a verb (*synergeō*) that means to work together, cooperate (with). The word picture suggests cooperation in a common purpose. That purpose is to bring people to maturity and completion in Christlikeness (Col. 1:28-29). Those who minister to others must realize and maintain a close partnership with God in which God is the major Partner. This arrangement removes any reason for pride or selfish motives in the worker.

**The Christian Worker as a Slave.** In 4:1 Paul uses a rich word picture, which is unfortunately hidden in the simple translation *servants*. The word (*hypēretēs*) literally means an under rower, as in a slave who rowed in the lower deck of a ship. It came to mean an assistant under another's authority (cf. Mark 14:54, 65; Acts 13:5) or one in a subservient position. Paul evokes this metaphor to correct the Corinthians' elevated estimation of the minister's role. Christian workers are nothing more than slaves. Jesus Christ is the Master; the duty of the Christian worker is to obey without reservation.

**The Christian Worker as a Steward.** Also in 4:1 Paul assumes the designation of steward. The word (*oikonomos*) includes the word for house (*oikos*) to mean a household manager. As such, the steward is responsible for the property and possessions entrusted to him by the master of the house. His chief duty is to 'be found faithful' in the discharge of his responsibilities (v. 2). Overseers in the church are called stewards of that ministry (Titus 1:7) and all Christians are charged as stewards to use their gifts in ministry to others (1 Peter 4:10). The Christian worker must realize that the discharge of his or her stewardship will be judged by the Lord, the Master (v. 4). As in Jesus' parable, dutiful stewards are rewarded with the approbation 'Well done, good and faithful servant' (Matt. 25:23).

## Conclusion

Within this single section of Scripture God has given Christian workers seven word pictures as a pattern for ministry. The church belongs to Jesus Christ; Christians who serve in it function as His servants. We serve by offering others loving care and leadership, humble service, cultivation of spiritual growth, and strengthening as we cooperate with God in a common purpose, obey God, and faithfully manage the ministry He has committed to us. We should serve so that the message, not the minister, is central. The more we conform to this pattern, the more God will use us to impact others. In doing this, we fulfill our God-given ministries.