



Simple Servants

Christopher B. Harbin

1st Corinthians 3:5-15

Who am I? It is one of the most basic questions of human existence. Who am I? Who are you? What defines our relationship? In my high school literature classes, the questions were always the same: Who are we? Whence came we? and Whither go we? These were deemed the central questions of literature. We were to define how the various authors raised and answered these basic questions.

On another level, relationships are built upon social expectations flowing from these same questions of identity. In Yann Martel's book, *Life of Pi*,¹ he discusses social order concerns based on these same questions within the Animal Kingdom. These concerns pertain to life beyond just human society. Who am I? Who are we? How should we view and interact with one another? The concern is not only personal identity, but identity in relation to others. Paul addresses these issues in Corinth.

Those believers were fractured over identity, status, and social posturing. They claimed social distinctions from relationships with specific leaders, but Paul calls their bluff on that count. That does not mean they did not have their disagreements over all sorts of issues. He simply says there is no value in following one or another personality, regardless of who that individual might be.

True, the Corinthian divisions were multi-faceted. They were divided over who was holier, who was more spiritual, who was stronger, who was wiser, who exhibited the showier spiritual gifts, who followed whom, who had baptized whom, and even questions of material wealth and social standing beyond the church. If there an issue might divide a church, it was in play at Corinth. There were even those who claimed to be so spiritual they were above living by any code of moral conduct. They claimed freedom from any restraint in order that God's grace might overflow more fully in their lives.

At heart, however, all these issues all boiled down to defining identity and ranking within their structure. Who am I? Who are we? If we are the body of Christ, the assembly of the redeemed, how can we be so diverse and still loved by God? How can I accept you, when you are different from me? What is my worth and position in relation to yours? How can we be on the same team if we disagree?

Definitions of identity grant us a sense of security. Martel speaks to this in his book as he addresses the lives of caged animals. He describes a lion tamer who brings lions into a ring he has first entered. The lions are unsure of their standing. This is not their ground. The tamer was present first and uses voice and action to demand acceptance of his superior place in the pride formed around him. Any one of the lions could easily overcome the tamer, but they give greater value to knowing and accepting their position within the social system they have entered. When roles are established, they will understand who they are in relation to that new structure. This definition and its acceptance grants them the security they crave above any desire to test the system.

We like understanding the rules. We like normalcy. We like knowing how to relate to one another. Like a pride of lions, we also define our status and position in relation to others in the pride. All too often, however, we work with a skewed concept of identity, like the lions gathering around the lion tamer who claims the position of alpha male. By all rights, he should be assessed differently, but as long as he follows the rules for a lion pride, he can maintain his position of superiority and command the

¹ Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi*. Random House Canada, 2002.

mightier beasts surrounding him. They accept his authority out of their insecurity and uncertainty. To feel secure, they will sacrifice reality and accept the usurper who offers security, no matter how fake.

There was a lot of posturing in Corinth. There were varied claims to primacy. Many groups vied for the position of an alpha male among the pride. The rules of engagement in Corinth were in flux, as most of these believers were not only new to Christianity, they were also new to the Judaism underlying First Century Christianity. They had not yet learned the new rules of engagement, much less the overlays on power established by the Lord they now claimed. Christ was not their focus.

“I follow Paul!” “I follow Apollo!” “I follow Peter!” “I follow Christ!” were completely improper claims in their professed faith. Paul had already reminded the Corinthians that such claims conflicted with those same leaders. In the end, it was just posturing about personal worth and status. Christ had come to fashion them all into one united body, under the authority of Christ Jesus alone.

Paul addressed the identity of the acclaimed leaders. He had begun the church in Corinth before being run out of town. Apollo had come behind him to continue building the church. Their ministries had occurred over different periods, but they had been co-workers seeking the same objectives. Their tasks had differed. Actions, styles, and emphases were different. Means of expression and personal ministry characteristics had varied, but at heart, in questions of identity, they were the same. Both were servants, God’s stewards, embarked on the same mission.

Paul’s importance, Apollo’s importance, Peter’s importance, our importance does not come from personal worth. The importance a leader or minister for Christ Jesus does not come from self. It comes simply from the serving of Christ. Jesus is the alpha male for the church. The rest of us are simply servants to the one Master.

Paul indeed discussed differences in the quality of ministry, but he said those are issues for God to judge. Nearer at hand, the question is about our own relationship, not to a specific leader, but to the One those leaders attempt to serve. Who are we in relation to Christ Jesus? Do our lives reflect the attitudes and character of people serving Christ, or do they focus on our status in the pride?

When the lions enter the cage, status among themselves becomes secondary. What matters is their relationship to and acceptance of the lion tamer within this new pride, this ground they enter as outsiders. Were the lion tamer to enter the lions’ territory, he would be discounted as irrelevant. When they enter his, however, they must evaluate themselves on the basis of his presence and primacy.

So are our lives before Christ Jesus. It matters little who has been or would be in charge in the absence of Christ Jesus. It matters little what roles we give each other within our pride. The ground of our being is changed. What matters now is our relationship and service to Christ Jesus, by whose name we are called. We enter His ground. We must leave ours behind.

Why should we care about any other rank within the pride? There is but one alpha male to whom we owe allegiance and submission, Christ Jesus. As Paul states of himself and Apollo, “We are simply servants of God to help you trust Jesus.” Human status is not central. It is a distraction. Christ is all.

When we recognize our identity as servants, status no longer matters. What matters is that each one assist others in trusting Christ Jesus, and Christ alone. Personalities are never primary in the cause of the gospel. There is One worthy of allegiance. All else is senseless posturing that cannot grant true security. Are we ready to be the simple servants of Christ Jesus like Paul and Apollo? After all, that is our true identity, servants working together for Christ Jesus. There is true security in our identity as simple servants.

*_*_*