

Chapter Four

THE PROBLEM OF FAVORITISM AND CONCEIT (4:1-21)

IDEAS TO INVESTIGATE:

1. Why would Paul emphasize trustworthiness and then tell these Corinthians not to judge one another?
2. Does the admonition against favoring one another mean Christians should not feel closer to some brethren than to others?
3. What is Paul's purpose in demeaning the office of apostle?
4. Is it really all right to imitate Christian leaders like Paul—should we not rather imitate Christ?
5. What is the "power" in which the kingdom of God consists?

SECTION 1

Partiality (4:1-5)

4 This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ²Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. ³But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. ⁴I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.

4:1-4 Cause: The Corinthian Christians were showing partiality toward their favorite apostles and other leaders of the church. Partiality has no place in the kingdom of God. Partiality is defined: "To show favor to a person because of his external possessions, position or privilege; or, to accept the person instead of the cause." In the Old Testament the Hebrew words *nasha panim* are translated *partiality* and mean literally, "face-taking" (i.e. to judge on the basis of appearance). The Greek words *prosopolempsia* and *prosopolemptes* (sometimes translated, "respect of person") also mean literally, "face-taking" (see Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; James 2:1, 9).

Partiality is severely condemned in the Old Testament (see Lev. 19:15; Deut. 1:17; 16:19-20; Job 13:10; Prov. 24:23; 28:21; Mal. 2:9). Jesus clearly taught that it was not to be a part of the character of the kingdom-citizen (Matt. 5:43-48). The epistles speak severely against partiality (see Col. 3:22—4:1; Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6; Eph. 6:9; I Tim. 5:21; James 2:9).

Partiality creates discord (Matt. 20:24; Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46f.; 22:24-27; Acts 6:1-6; I Cor. ch. 11-14); it causes denigration of God (Jer. 18:13ff.; Rom. 2:24; Gal. 2:11ff.); it defiles the conscience; it destroys the soul.

The cause for the display of partiality among the Corinthian brethren is evident to Paul. They were not evaluating apostles and other leaders by the *one and only* God-approved standard which is *faithfulness*. Paul uses two Greek words by which he categorizes *all* Christians whether they be leaders or followers. The word *servant* in Greek (*huperetas*) is the word from a mariner's vocabulary designating the "under-rower" in the ancient galley ships of the Mediterranean Sea. It came to mean "under-servant" or "underling" and was applied to anyone who took orders from someone higher. The second word, *steward*, in Greek is *oikonomos*, literally, "law of the house," meaning "house manager." Barclay calls the *oikonomos*, the *major domo*. The point Paul is stressing here is no matter what a Christian's place in the church, he is a servant. All Christians are underlings and take orders from Christ. All Christians are merely stewards taking care of the Master's goods. All Christians are to be evaluated only as to whether they have faithfully *accepted* this position as servant or not. We are not to compare one another's relationship to the Lord on the basis of skills, talents, accomplishments or any other quantitative measurement. When Jesus told the parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11-27) it is noteworthy that the nobleman did not condemn the man who had been given five pounds and came back with only five pounds more. If quantitative measurements are the criteria of God's judgments, the servant given five pounds should have been condemned for not returning ten more like the first servant. The only servant condemned was the third one who was unfaithful and distrusted the nobleman's faithfulness and fairness, (see comments, *The Gospel of Luke*, pages 420-425, by Butler, pub. College Press).

Christians must *always* think of apostles or other brethren in places of leadership as servants. To think otherwise produces favoritism and partiality and, ultimately, destructive division. Paul was emphatic! He insisted that the Corinthian Christians should *regard* the apostles as no more than underlings and stewards. The Greek word translated

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regard is logizestho. It is a word from the Greek world of business and finance. It means "to enter a calculation on a ledger." He wants it calculated and written down that apostles are merely servants. They are *not* Masters! The church must not enter one apostle on the "ledger" as of more account than others. The church must not show favoritism toward any church leader—they are all servants. Human judgments are always on the basis of appearances, seniority, popularity, or the like. Paul said the only thing that counted was *trustworthiness*.

The apostles were merely the first "stewards" commissioned by the Lord to dispense the "mysteries" of God. The apostles were specially gifted dispensers, to be true, but nothing more than dispensers. The Greek word *musterion*, translated "mystery" is used in the New Testament of God's redemptive program. The word *musterion* is often used by the pagan religions of the first century for doctrines and rites known by the members of their cults but kept secret from the uninitiated. The writers of the New Testament gave a new meaning to the word. God's redemptive program was symbolized and prophesied progressively but dimly in the Old Testament (Rom. 3:21; Heb. 1:1). Redemption was fully accomplished and revealed in the incarnate work of Christ and through the apostolic message which explains it and applies it.

Verse two begins with an unusual Greek phrase; *ho de loipon zeteitai en tois oikonomois*. Literally it would be translated, "As for the remaining, it is sought among stewards. . . ." What Paul means is that a certain character is sought after in *all* servants. That character is *faithfulness* (Gr. *pistos*). It is not simply sought for—it is *required!* The Greek word *zeteitai* is often translated "required, demanded" (see Luke 11:50-51; 12:48). J. B. Phillips paraphrases, "And it is a prime requisite in a trustee that he should prove worthy of his trust." Faithfulness is dependability and reliability. *All* servants of Christ (and that includes apostles) are evaluated not on the basis of giftedness but of dependability and reliability. Because some Christians may have been given miraculous powers in the first century, or even the calling as an apostle, does not mean they are to be set apart from other servants who never received miraculous gifts. Each servant is required only to be reliable and dependable with as much as Christ has given him. Jesus described the "faithful and wise steward" in Luke 12:42-43. Some classic examples of men who were faithful to earthly masters are Joseph to Potiphar, Daniel to King Darius (Dan. 6:4), and Hananiah (Neh. 7:2).

The apostles have come down to us in history as men of greatness, not because of their educational attainments or political achievements but because they were *faithful* to Christ. Being the *servants* of all, they became the *greatest* of all (see Matt. 20:20-28).

The Corinthian Christians had a problem with judging! Paul had to warn them again in his second letter that they were “comparing themselves with one another” and, in so doing, “were without understanding” (see II Cor. 10:12). Jesus evidently anticipated that all citizens of the kingdom of God would have a problem with judging. He devoted the last one-third of his Sermon on the Mount to the problems of making proper judgments (see Matt. 7:1-27). Christians are supposed to make certain judgments:

- a. Christians must judge that some are “swine” and some are “dogs” and not cast pearls before them (Matt. 7:6).
- b. Christians must judge what they would wish others to do to them so they may do the same to others (Matt. 7:12).
- c. Christians must judge which is the narrow gate and which is the broad way (Matt. 7:13).
- d. Christians must judge who are false prophets by the doctrines they teach and by the fruits they produce in their teachings (Matt. 7:15-20).
- e. Christians must judge that doing the will of God is of primary importance (Matt. 7:21-23).
- f. Christians must judge the proper place to build their lives (Matt. 7:24-27).
- g. Christians must *not* judge by appearances, but with righteousness and justice (John 7:24).
- h. Christians ought to be able to make fair and honest judgments between themselves when one has a grievance against another (I Cor. 6:1-8).
- i. Christians are to test everything for its evil-quotient and abstain from every form of evil (I Thess. 5:21), especially in the matter of religious teaching (see I Cor. 14:29; I John 4:1-6).
- j. Christians must be able to judge when a brother is “living in idleness” (II Thess. 3:6-15).
- k. Christians must be able to judge when a brother “is overtaken in any trespass” and restore him in a spirit of gentleness (Gal. 6:1ff.; James 5:19-20, etc.).

There are many judgments Christians must make about people and situations. Why then did Paul say, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court”? Literally, the Greek phrase is: *de eis elachiston estin hina huph humon*

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anakritho e hupo anthropines hemeras; "But unto a little it is that by you I have been judged, or by the agency of a man's day." The context makes it clear Paul is saying human beings, even Christians, should not be arrogating to themselves the prerogatives of selecting the "best" apostle to follow. Christ chose the apostles. Christ alone has authority to distinguish one above another. So Paul is telling these divisive minded people that what they are doing is of no significance whatever, except that it is ruining the Christian fellowship there. Their decisions that one apostle or leader is *better* than another is ridiculous. If they were trying to decide whether Paul were actually an apostle or a false apostle, they had every right and obligation to do so. That could be decided, and should be decided, on the basis of the *signs* of an apostle (see II Cor. 12:12). But deciding as to which apostle or leader was *better* than the other, and then using such a decision to form divisions and opposing sides within the church was utterly pointless. It was worse than that! It was assuming prerogatives which belonged only to Christ.

The phrase, "or by the agency of a man's day," is an idiomatic statement referring to the indisputable limitations of the human experience to make eternal judgments. Human life is bounded by too narrow an horizon to make such judgments. The word "day" in all languages and idioms signifies judgments. The word "diet" to designate a legislative or judicial body comes from the Latin word *dies*, the word for *day*. The word "daysman" means an arbitrator. The RSV has translated the phrase to give its idiomatic meaning. There is no human *diet* (or court) with sufficient authority or expertise to divide the church over human leaders. What Paul has said here condemns *all* division in the body of Christ, and especially that division which is perpetuated by and in favor of religious leadership. Modern denominationalism with its proclivity to perpetuate the distinguishing of one Christian from another by elevation of human religious leaders (dead or alive) stands under this apostolic censure! All a Christian needs to know about a spiritual teacher and leader is whether he is faithful to the Lord's Word and the Lord's way of life. All Christians manifesting honest effort to be dependably and reliably following Christ are to love, cherish and honor one another and unite their hearts and minds in singleness of praise and service to Christ alone.

Continuing to expose the cause of so much favoritism and division, Paul implies that part of it may be the tendency of the Corinthians to *misevaluate* themselves. The way Paul makes this inference is to say that he does not even critique (judge) himself. Every man is predisposed to evaluate himself too highly (Rom. 12:3; Phil. 2:3). No

human being can trust self-evaluation because the heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt (see Jer. 17:9). Only the word of God is able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the human heart correctly (cf. Heb. 4:12-13). The Greeks placed great emphasis on the adage, "Know thyself." That is good advice if a man has in his possession the revealed word of God, the Creator, and if he will saturate his mind with that word surrendering to its divine judgments and evaluations. But by himself *no* man can know himself for he did not create himself! When men reject God's word for their own opinions, they overlook their faults and are always able to find someone else more wicked than they. Consider Jesus' parable of the two men who went to the temple to pray—one a Pharisee the other a tax collector (Luke 18:9-14), or consider the Jewish ruler's estimate of the common people (John 7:49).

We think J. B. Phillips has captured the essence of Paul's statement here in his paraphrase, "I don't even value my opinion of myself. For I might be quite ignorant of any fault in myself—but that doesn't justify me before God. My only true judge is the Lord." When Paul said he knew nothing against himself he was not claiming that he had never sinned. He was well aware of his failings (see Rom. 7:13-25; I Tim. 1:15, etc.). Paul is simply speaking hypothetically. He is saying, "For the sake of illustration, let us presume that I can't think of any wrong doing or wickedness against myself—that still does not prove infallibly there isn't any!" All it would prove is that Paul could not think of any. But what about the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent God? Before God *all* men are sinners—even apostles! Before God *all men saved* are men saved by grace through faith.

4:5 Cure: In the final analysis, the judgment of God is the only infallible and absolute judgment. God alone knows all the circumstances, secret thoughts, intentions and motives behind man's actions. Much that the world thinks is goodness may have been done from very wicked and self-serving motives. So Paul advocates as the cure for the problem of favoritism and conceit an awareness that honoring one Christian servant above another must be left to the judgment of God. Paul exhorts these Corinthian Christians to cease their favoritism and partiality toward spiritual servants. When Paul says, "Therefore do not pronounce *judgment* . . ." he uses the Greek verb *krinete*, in the imperative mood, which means Paul is *commanding* them to stop making such superficial judgments. Christians must not pronounce final verdicts on any person who is evidently trying to the best of his ability (and is not causing divisions in the church) to be

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faithful to the Lord. Christians must wait upon the Lord's return for final rewards and honors to be handed out to his servants. The Lord alone has the prerogative to hand out final commendations or condemnations. Some of these Corinthian church members were usurping the Lord's prerogative and honoring one servant of the Lord over another by their fallible, schismatic standards when they said, "I am of Paul" or, "I am of Apollos." Some of them, causing division and disorder in the church by jealousy and selfish ambition (see James 3:13-16), were collaborating with the demons of hell! One would think the elders of the Corinthian church would have recognized such schismatic persons as false teachers by the fruits (division and disorder) of their teachings (see Matt. 7:16; Acts 20:29-30).

SECTION 2

Pompousness (4:6-13)

6 I have applied all this to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brethren, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷For who sees anything different in you? What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

8 Already you are filled! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! ⁹For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. ¹⁰We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, ¹²and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things.

4:6-7 Egotistical: Paul had made it clear that Peter, Apollos, and he, had all *received* their stewardship to Christ by grace, not by merit. Paul insisted that whatever any apostle or leading teacher in the church might appear to be by the world's standards, they were nothing

more than servants seeking to be found faithful to their one Lord. He made it plain that no apostle or leader should be exalted above another. And all along he has been using himself and Apollos as an illustration. The Greek word translated *applied* is *meteschematisa*. It is the word from which we get the English word *schematic*, which means a sketch or a drawing. *Meteschematisa* means "to transfer by way of a figure."

Paul made himself and Apollos an illustration *for their benefit*. The Greek phrase, *di humas*, means, "for you, or, on account of you. . . ." Notice also Paul continues to call them "brethren" even though they are thinking too highly of themselves and are "puffed up." He has not "written them off" or expelled them from his fellowship. He will exert every effort, by every proper means possible, to benefit them.

The word *live* (as in the RSV) is not in the Greek text, and neither is the word *think* (as in the KJV). The literal reading from the Greek text would be, ". . . that in us you may learn not above (or beyond) what has been written. . . ." The phrase which follows shows that Paul is talking about *both* their thinking and their living. The Corinthian Christians are exhorted to learn by the example of humility and service practiced by Paul and Apollos toward one another and toward all other Christians. Paul and Apollos do not think of themselves or live toward one another in any way contrary to the *scriptures* (Gr. *gegraptai*, what is written). They are bound by the scriptures to be humble before God as much as anyone else. Paul had already quoted six Old Testament references about boasting (Ps. 33:10; Isa. 29:14; Jer. 9:24; Isa. 64:4; 65:17; Job 5:13) and there are many more (Ps. 49:6; 94:4; 17:7; Prov. 27:1; Isa. 10:15). Jesus spoke much about humility and against arrogance and conceit, and it may be that Paul is referring to the gospel documents since there is evidence that some of them may have been in existence as early as 50 A.D. The Christian must *not* be guided in his attitude toward himself and toward others by personal feelings or by any human standard. His attitudes are under the control of the mind of Christ which is revealed in the Bible (and nowhere else).

Literally, the Greek text of verse six reads, ". . . that not one over (or, beyond one you may be puffed up against the other. . . ." The Greek word *phusioythe* is translated *puffed up* and means, "to blow up, to inflate," and is from the word *phusa*, "bellows." It is used metaphorically in the New Testament of pride (cf. I Cor. 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4; Col. 2:18). This does not mean we cannot feel closer to some co-workers than others. Paul had his Luke and his Timothy!

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The apostle now asks a series of questions, with just a trace of sarcasm to arrest their attention, to bring them back to a realistic view of themselves. He asks first, "Who sees anything different in you?" The Greek phrase is *tis gar see diakrinei* and literally translated would read, "For who makes you thoroughly separate or distinct?" J. B. Phillips has captured the idea in his paraphrase, "For who makes you different from somebody else?" The Corinthian Christians may have had many different functionaries (cf. I Cor. 12:4ff.), but they all had the same position or rank before God—that was *servant*. Paul is implying that their attitude of superiority toward one another was born of presumptuous conceit. Even the fact that they had chosen one apostle over another to follow did not make them superior, for apostles themselves are only servants! Their conceit was perpetuating division which in turn was destroying the temple (church) of God.

The second question, "What have you that you did not receive?" shows why their feeling of superiority was presumptuous. Everything they had they received from God. Life, salvation, spiritual gifts, the apostolic word, the Spirit of God—nothing was merited—everything was by grace (cf. I Cor. 1:26-31). All men everywhere need to be constantly reminded of this fact. Paul with the third question, "If then you *received* (Gr. *elābes*) it, why do you boast as not having received (Gr. *labon*) it?" There was simply *nothing* they could claim to have earned or originated themselves—therefore, they had no reason to boast. There was no need to elevate one apostle over another for they, too, had only what they *received* from God by grace.

4:8-13 Exploitative: These Corinthian brethren had become so egocentric, they were exploiting apostles and teachers for their own selfish purposes. They were building (they thought) their own reputations and glory at the expense of the apostles, for their divisions and partyisms hurt the apostles and brought disrepute to the name of Christ and his church. But they did not care so long as they appeared to be "wise" in their selectivity and exclusivity. Paul seeks to correct this by admonishing them through sarcasm and irony. They must be brought to see themselves as they really are—arrogant, exploitative, uncaring spiritual brats. It is a serious problem. It is destroying the church! Striking, impressive, attention-getting words must be used to solve the problem.

They considered themselves to have arrived at the goal of the Christian life—spiritual maturity—by being wiser than others. They exalted one leader or one apostle over another, thereby arrogating to themselves the stature of "spiritual giants." They thought they proved by their divisions that they alone knew which leader was the

right one for the church. Each party or group believed they alone could make superior spiritual evaluations. Each group considered the other groups immature, unqualified, and unacceptable for fellowship in the Lord. Each group considered itself the ruling group ("kings").

The apostle vividly compares their pride, egotism and superiority with the actual life and reputation of an apostle. William Barclay illustrates:

When a Roman general won a great victory he was allowed to parade his victorious army through the streets of the city with all the trophies that he had won; the procession was called a Triumph. But at the end there came a little group of captives who were doomed to death; they were being taken to the arena to fight with the beasts and so to die. The Corinthians in their blatant pride were like the conquering general displaying the trophies of his prowess; the apostles were like the little group of captives doomed to die. To the Corinthians the Christian life meant flaunting their privileges and reckoning up their achievement; to Paul it meant humble service and a readiness to die for Christ.

The apostles never considered themselves kings. They knew there was only one King—Jesus. Paul is reminding them all followers of Jesus are merely his bondslaves and servants. Paul proceeds to tell these Corinthians, glorying in having chosen certain apostles to follow, just where apostles are in the scheme of things (especially as viewed by the worldly-minded). First, apostles were made to be spectacles. The Greek word translated *spectacle* is *theatron* from which we get the English word *theater*. What Paul means is the apostles were made public spectacles of humiliation through what they suffered. The same Greek word *theatron* is used in Hebrews 10:33 and translated "publicly exposed." There it is describing the public abuse and affliction Jewish Christians had to suffer from the unconverted Jews. Paul suffered that kind of humiliation from Jew and Gentile alike (see the book of Acts; also II Cor. 11:21-33). The Jews called him an apostate and blasphemer; Greek philosophers called him a babbler and trouble-maker; governors called him "mad." Paul had a reputation as a menace to society (Acts 17:6). Next, Paul says, the world looks upon the apostles as morons (Gr. *moroi*, fools). Paul accepted the world's evaluation, willing to be called a fool if it was for Christ's sake. He is saying to the Christians at Corinth that if they are expecting to gain a reputation from the world by dividing up and claiming to

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be followers of any of the apostles, their reputation will be that of fools following fools.

All through this section, Paul contrasts what the sophisticated world thought of the apostles and what the Christians at Corinth, in their naivete, thought the world should think of them. To the world the apostles (and, all of Christianity) were fools, weak, disreputable. The Corinthian Christians thought if they structured the church after worldly ways, with positions and parties of seniority and superiority by selecting the most prestigious leaders to follow, they would rule, be wise, be strong, and be honored. But the world does not see apostolic Christianity that way.

All the while the Corinthian Christians were reveling and basking in their own egotism, the apostles were suffering great privations and hardships to bring them to Christ and to strengthen them in Christ. Apostles went hungry and thirsty many times for the sake of the gospel. Paul knew how to endure hunger (Phil. 4:11-13). He knew what it meant to be beaten like a slave would be *buffeted* (Gr. *kolaphizometha*, beaten with the fist). One ancient Greek knew a man was a slave because he watched him being *kolaphizometha*—buffeted. Apostles were looked upon as itinerant wanderers (Gr. *astatoumen*, unsettled, unfixed, without a stationary place or home). They had to do *manual labor* (Gr. *kopiomen*), working for a living with their own hands (see I Cor. 9:6; Acts 18:3). Greek culture looked upon those who worked with their hands as the lowest class of society—just above slaves. Tradesmen certainly would never be classed as leaders of Greek society. Regardless of what any society or culture says, labor and work are held up throughout the Bible as character-building virtues. The sophisticates of the world, however, think otherwise. The world would see the Christians at Corinth as followers, low-class common laborers—tentmakers and fishermen.

The apostles were, by temperament, quite unlike the sophisticated Greeks. Aristotle said that the highest virtue was *megalopsuchia*—*with great soul*; and, he said, the virtue of the man with the great soul was that he would not endure insults. But the apostles had the Spirit of Christ in them. By Christ's love they were constrained and controlled. The Greek text is extremely terse, for the sake of impact. Paul says, literally, "Being slandered, we bless." The Greek word *loidoroumenoi* means *to be insulted* or *reviled* (see John 9:28; Acts 23:4). Paul says, "Being persecuted, we bear it; being blasphemed, we entreat, or conciliate." The pagan Greek and Roman world of Paul's day looked upon conduct such as the apostles exhibited as

grovelling weakness, a character defect, and a sure mark of the lowliest class of society.

The apostles were, by reputation, the scum of the earth. The Greek word *perikatharmata*, translated *refuse*, refers to the garbage scoured or scraped off a kitchen vessel. The Greek word *peripsema*, translated *offscouring* means "to wipe the dirt off all around." In other words, the majority of the world, in that day, looked upon these apostles of the crucified Christ as garbage and dirt. And these Corinthian Christians thought their choosing one apostle over another would make them appear wise and worldly in the eyes of the pagan culture of the day. One is reminded by modern-day church people who create divisions in the body of Christ because of preacher-worship. And preachers are not exactly considered first-class citizens of modern culture. In fact, movies and television go to great lengths to portray preachers of the Bible as rabble-rousing, ignorant, self-serving menaces to society. Preachers, teachers and other leaders of the Lord's church should never be the object of a church's pride. They certainly are no reason over which to divide the church.

SECTION 3

Exasperating (4:14-21)

14 I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 15 For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 16 I urge you, then, be imitators of me. 17 Therefore I sent to you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. 18 Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. 20 For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. 21 What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

4:14-17 Misbehaving: Paul, having just written rather sarcastically, does not want the Corinthians to assume that he is bitter toward them or that he does not care for them. He *does* care for them—he loves them as a father loves his exasperating children. So he admonishes them. He does not write to destroy them with shame, but to correct

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them. The Greek word *noutheto*, translated *admonish*, is a compound of two Greek words, *nous*, mind, and *tithemi*, to put. Literally, it means to put into the mind as a warning some word or words. It is different from the Greek word *paideia* which stresses correction by action, although a good father uses both forms of correction (see Eph. 6:4). Paul hopes to correct their misbehavior by a word of admonition, but he will take action if necessary (see 4:18-21 below).

They are his *agapeta tekna*—beloved children—and although they may have had *thousands* (Greek, *murious*, myriads) of *teachers* (Greek, *paidagogous*, tutors, pedagogues), they have had only one spiritual father—Paul. The Greek word *paidagogous* means, literally, “a leader of the child.” The Greek *pedagogue* was usually a slave who was given charge of the children of the wealthy and influential. The *pedagogue* escorted the children to school, disciplined them when they needed it, and often tutored the children when they were not in school. The *pedagogue* might do some of the work of a father and even become very intimately attached to the children, but he could never become the father. A father begets. Only one person can be the father of a child. When Paul said, “. . . you do not have many *fathers*. . . .” he used the Greek word *pateras* (from which we get the English words, paternal, patronize). But when he said, “. . . I became your *father* in Christ Jesus. . . .” he used the Greek word *egennesa* which actually means *begat*. Paul brought about their conversion to Christ personally through his preaching (see Acts 18:8; I Cor. 3:10). He laid the “foundation” of gospel work in Corinth. Paul had begotten many spiritual children in Christ Jesus; Timothy (I Tim. 1:2) and Titus (Titus 1:4) and Onesimus (Philemon 10), and hundreds of others (see I Thess. 2:11).

It is important to notice in this text that Paul says the Corinthians were begotten by Paul in Christ *through* the gospel. Spiritual birth (new birth, being born again) is through the gospel preached by the apostles. Where does one find the gospel preached by the apostles? In the book of Acts, beginning in Acts chapter two. What is the apostolic gospel through which the Corinthians were born again or anew? It is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was manifested in the flesh, died on a cross for the atonement of the world’s sin, arose from the dead on the third day to validate that atonement; it is that men must so trust that declaration of God they will repent (change their mind) and submit to the command of the apostles to be immersed in water unto the remission of sins; it is that the Holy Spirit of Christ will take residence in the penitent and obedient believer and become to him God’s down-payment on eternal life. No man,

since the redemptive work of Christ at the cross and the empty tomb, can be begotten in Christ apart from believing and obeying the apostolic gospel. Christians are begotten through the word of God, the gospel (see I Thess. 2:13; II Thess. 1:8; 2:13-15; James 1:18; I Peter 1:22-25). The word of God, the gospel, is the spiritual *seed* (Greek *sperma* or *spora*, see Luke 8:11 and I Peter 1:23) or *sperm* of God which begets the Spirit of God in man's heart but only when man believes it and obeys it. Many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were immersed in water (see Acts 18:8) and were thus begotten in Christ *through* the gospel!

Paul admonishes them (warns them) they are straying from the example he had given them as to how to live in Christ. He exhorts them to *mimic* his life in Christ (Greek, *mimetai*, imitate). He does not infer they should become disciples or followers of Paul or anyone else, but that they should imitate his "ways in Christ" (4:17). Paul used this exhortation frequently (see I Cor. 11:1; Acts 20:35; I Cor. 7:7; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; II Thess. 3:7; II Tim. 1:13). The Bible is full of admonitions for Christians to imitate the example of men of faith such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and countless others (see Rom. 4:1ff.; Heb. 11:1ff.). Of course, Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus is the "pathfinder" or "pioneer" of our salvation (Heb. 2:10). We *follow* Jesus, but we may also imitate Paul as he follows Jesus. Like spoiled and selfish children, these Corinthian Christians were misbehaving. They certainly were not behaving as their spiritual father did.

As Paul was writing this letter, Timothy was on his way from Ephesus to Corinth. Paul had sent him (see Acts 19:22) by way of Macedonia with Erastus as his companion. Timothy was sent to remind them of how Paul lived in Christ and what he taught in Christ. Paul was no hypocrite—he lived what he taught and he taught Christ and lived Christ everywhere, in every church (see I Thess. 2:9-12; II Cor. 11:23; 12:14-18, etc.). A journey from Ephesus to Corinth, by way of Macedonia, by ancient modes of travel, facing all the dangers of the ancient traveler, might seem unnecessary in light of what might appear to be an insignificant problem in the church. But Paul knew it was not an insignificant problem. All the sacrifice and tension necessary to correct it must be made immediately. The church at Corinth was being *destroyed* by the schismatics! Timothy and Erastus must travel some 600 miles or more, the major portion of which would probably be on foot, to attempt to produce some spiritual maturity in these bickering, arguing, misbehaving "children." This will be a work that spiritual "fathers" will have to do with their "children" so long as the church remains in this world. It does not cease!

FIRST CORINTHIANS

4:18-21 Mocking: Paul had heard that some of the Christians in Corinth were not only misbehaving, they were arrogant (Greek, *ephusiothesan*, puffed up) about it. Paul wrote this epistle at Ephesus in the Spring of 57 A.D. He told the Corinthians he planned to stay in Ephesus until after Pentecost (June) (I Cor. 16:8) and then come to Corinth for a visit. But he changed his plans (II Cor. 1:15, 16, 23) and apparently the Corinthians then accused him of weakness and cowardice, so he wrote what is entitled the second epistle to defend his change of plans.

There must have been some indication at the writing of the first letter that some of the brethren at Corinth were arrogantly boasting Paul would never come to Corinth and exercise any apostolic authority. They accused him of being bold when he was away from them and meek when face to face with them (II Cor. 10:1). His sending Timothy instead of going himself as first he planned seemed to them to be justifiable cause for a bold and arrogant attitude toward the apostle.

So the apostle promises, "But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, . . ." and he promises to show that their mockery is all talk without any power behind it. The Greek word *gnosomai*, translated "find out," is literally, *shall know*. Paul means to settle the issue once for all with the Corinthians about the authority of his apostolic message. The Greek word *pephusiomenon* is a perfect participle meaning they had become *puffed up* in the past and were *continuing* to be puffed up. They had not repented. For some reason the teachers and leaders of the church there had not seen the error of their ways and they were getting more arrogant and bold with each passing day.

In 2:4-5 we have the antithesis of *word* and *power*. The difference there is between words of sophisticated philosophies versus the historical facts of Christ's redemptive work. The truth of God (in the gospel of Christ and his apostles) has *power* to destroy all philosophies and theories that are merely guesswork (and not even good guesses at that). The power of the Spirit of God in his word is able to cast down all *imaginings* (Gr. *logismous*, rationalizations) and bring every *thought* (Gr. *noema*, concept, purpose, device) into captivity to obedience to Christ (see II Cor. 10:3-5). Paul is talking about going to Corinth to exercise the power of truth in the apostolic message versus the boasting sophistries of the wayward and divisive Christians there. He is *not* threatening a demonstration of any physical or ecclesiastical power. None of the apostles ever assumed any papal powers.

Paul is challenging the schismatics at Corinth that when he comes to them he will put their sophisticated philosophies to the test to see if they are producing in the lives of people what his apostolic gospel is able

to produce. It will be a test of spiritual strength and power. For, he says, the kingdom of God in a man's life is not demonstrated by words, but by the power of Christian living. So far, their sophistries have shown the exact *opposite* of Christian love and unity. In the kingdom of God, every thought is brought into obedience to Christ.

The choice is theirs. He will, if the Lord wills it, arrive shortly in Corinth. The question is, will they repent and bring their thinking and acting into obedience to Christ (as preached to them and written to them by Paul), or will they continue in their egotistical divisiveness? If they repent Paul will come with a gentle love. If they do *not* repent Paul will come with a chastening love. He says he will come with a *rod* (Gr. *hrabdo*, large wooden staff), but he is using the word rod as a metaphor. He does not intend to beat them physically, but to chasten them *with the truth*. It is by the power of the truth men are set free from enslavement to the destructive, damning lies of the devil which alienate them from God.

APPLICATIONS:

1. To extend favors or privileges to one person over another because of some outward attainment or circumstance is strictly anti-Biblical.
2. Christians have only *one* criterion by which they may judge the worth of a servant of Christ—*faithfulness*; not quantity, but quality, is the standard for stewardship.

Today's churches would do well to remember that in evaluating a minister's or missionary's success!

3. It is when the church begins to think of itself as a "business operation" or an "institution" and compares itself with the world that it begins to judge its servants (ministers, elders, missionaries, teachers, etc.) by worldly criteria of successfulness.

When the church does that, jealousy, arrogance, division and eventual destruction follows!

4. To really know yourself, study the Bible. No man should fall into the trap of evaluating himself apart from the Bible, for he cannot do so objectively and honestly.
5. Men and women put in places of Christian leadership must remember they are to be examples other Christians are to imitate.
6. The cure for the problem of partiality and arrogance which causes divisions in the church is to remember that *every* Christian is *only* what he is by the grace of God.
7. Schismatics in the church who exalt one leader over another are usually exploiting that leader for their own egotistical purposes.

FIRST CORINTHIANS

8. To accept insults, or to work with one's hands, for the sake of Christ, is not a sign of weakness, but of strength.
9. People are not born again through apostolic miracles, but through the apostolic gospel.
10. A faithful "spiritual father" will not shrink from chastening wayward "spiritual children" through the word of Christ, when love calls for it.

APPREHENSIONS:

1. What is a steward? What is trustworthiness? Why is this the only standard for judging a steward?
2. Are Christians to judge anything or anyone at all? What? How?
3. What are Christians *not* to judge?
4. What should a church seek foremost in a man they call to preach? Should it be personality? Speaking ability? Age? Administrative success?
5. Does the Scripture prohibit partiality? What is partiality? Are you partial?
6. Why did Paul use sarcasm about what the Corinthians thought of themselves?
7. Is it all right for Christians to use sarcasm? When? How?
8. If the apostles were held in such low esteem in their own lifetime, why are they widely venerated by the world today? How did Jesus explain this twist of human nature? (See Matt. 23:29-31.)
9. How are people "begotten" in Christ? Should those who lead others to Christ feel like a spiritual "parent"? What would that involve?
10. Do you look upon truth as powerful? What power does truth have? (See John 8:31-32.)