

VII. Fools for Christ

December 4/6, 2012

1 Corinthians 4:6-21

Aim: To imitate the apostle Paul in his humility as he faithfully bears the cross of Christ, instead of following the Corinthian's example of puffed-up pride in their own spirituality apart from the power of the cross.

Continuing his analysis of where the Corinthians were going wrong in their attitude to himself, Paul now turns to the area of their motivation. The key to understanding why they were acting as they were is to be found at the end of verse 6: 'That none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.' Pride, or being 'puffed up,' illustrates the wretched self-centeredness that lay at the heart of the Corinthian problems. Inflated with a false sense of their own importance and their own achievements, they not only forgot the gospel of the cross but actually resented taking up their cross daily to follow in the steps of their Lord. Probably one of the great attractions of the alternative spirituality on offer in Corinth, was the avoidance of being crucified with Christ. By contrast, they wanted to be rich and to be kings (v. 8).

If pride can be called an illness, it is safe to say the Corinthians had an epidemic on their hands. Three times in this chapter Paul accuses them of being 'puffed up' (4:6, 18, 19) and, for good measure, he repeats the charge in the next chapter (5:2). The word Paul uses in these verses comes from the Greek word for 'bellows.' A bellows is a collapsible device used for pumping air into something. So Paul is saying someone has taken the bellows to the Corinthians and now they were inflated and swelled up. Their own minds were the bellows that had pumped them up with pride and arrogance. They had become inflated with the so-called 'wisdom' of their day and had carried it over into their Christianity. In this passage, Paul turns the searchlight away from the nature of the gospel and of the gospel ministry and onto the Corinthians themselves, so they could see how critically ill they were with pride and how they could be healed of it.

A. Apostolic Examples (1 Cor. 4:6-7)

1. Don't Be Puffed Up (4:6)

⁶I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, 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.

'These things' refers to the figures of farmers (3:6-9), builders, (3:10-15), and servant-stewards (4:1-5), which refer to those who minister for the Lord. Paul tells them that in his mind's eye he has 'transferred' ('applied') each of these metaphors to Apollos and himself. Paul and Apollos are given as illustrations of what true ministers should be: humble servants and stewards (4:1). 'Transferred' (from *metaschēmatisō*) means changing the outward appearance of something while retaining the substance, indicating that Paul intends the church to read the two men's names into his imagery.

The formula 'what is written' may be an allusion to general teaching of the Old Testament, or it may point the church to those sacred writings which Paul has already brought to bear upon the local situation in 1:19, 31; 2:9; and 3:19-20.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

The reason that the Corinthians exalted themselves was arrogance. ‘Arrogant’ (*phusioō*) literally means ‘to puff up, inflate, blow up.’ The term was used metaphorically to indicate pride, which is having an inflated view of oneself.

Paul indicates two areas in which the audacity of pride is breathtakingly revealed. Firstly, he indicates that pride believes it knows the mind of God. The danger seems to be that the Corinthians thought they could read God’s mind, because of their superior spirituality, and that they could therefore predict God’s judgment. However, Paul has already said in 2:11 that ‘no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.’ There is only one way that human beings could ever know His mind and that is by revelation from the Spirit. Paul’s position is that the only certain locus of that revelation is what is written, that is, the Scriptures. If they are subtracted from or added to, then the mind of God revealed in His inspired Word is distorted. As soon as we imagine that we can begin to know His mind outside the teaching of Scripture, we shall be in danger of elevating our own inspiration and opinions to the same authority level as God’s revelation.

The Corinthians are to learn from Paul and Apollos ‘not to go beyond what is written.’ Evidently this was a local proverb that Paul translates to this situation. We might say something like, ‘keep within your boundaries,’ or ‘stay within bounds.’ This applies, so it appears, to local leaders and teachers who might, as it were, ‘become too big for their boots,’ assuming too great a role within the congregation.

2. Don’t Be Boastful (4:7)

⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

However there is another feature of human pride to which verse 7 draws our attention. Pride also forgets how much it needs the grace of God. Here is the ultimate deathblow to all sinful judgmentalism. Paul concludes his exhortation with a series of questions to humble those who are ‘puffed up’ with pride, as they favored one leader against another or were themselves favored above others. By these rhetorical questions Paul has exposed the willful individualism of the Corinthians and demonstrates that haughtiness is out of order.

The first question is, ‘For who makes you differ from another?’ Who outside their own circle thinks that they are special? No one. Therefore, they should see themselves as run-of-the-mill people utterly dependent upon the Lord. As Christians, they were different from others and had been brought into a superior position, but this was no credit to them. They were not saved by their own doing, but solely by the grace of God. So Paul is reminding them they owe everything to God.

The second question is, ‘And what do you have that you did not receive?’ The first question seems to related specifically to salvation, but this one embraces all of life. There is absolutely nothing in life we can take credit for. All that they possess has been given to them by God, for which reason they should be thankful.

Paul’s third question really drives the point home: ‘Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?’ People who receive a gift are not given any credit for it. The credit always goes to the one who gave the gift. No one ever acknowledges a gift by saying, ‘Thank me.’ We all realize there would be no gift if it were not for the giver, so we always give the credit to the giver. The Corinthians had not only received salvation from the Lord, but they

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

had also received from him the various preachers they were following. There was nothing for them to get high and mighty about. The credit for the salvation and the preachers all belonged to the Lord. Why do they elevate themselves as the patrons of ministers whom they have neither called nor equipped? Instead of looking down their noses at those who followed other preachers, they should all have joined together in giving God the glory.

Paul's questions reveal the grace of God. In response to Paul's questions, the Christian says, 'Anything I have and all that I have is God's gift of grace to me. If He has given me health and strength, opportunities to serve, abilities and skills, family and friends, they are all as much His gifts of grace, as is salvation itself. I have simply received them totally undeservedly. So there is nothing to boast about in me; I will boast only in the Lord.' This is how we should respond in light of Paul's questions. If, on the Last Day, God finds us worthy of any praise or reward, that will be due solely to His grace and therefore entirely for His glory. There is no need for us therefore to compare ourselves with others.

B. Apostolic Irony (1 Cor. 4:8-13)

1. What the Corinthians Think the Christian Life Is (4:8)

⁸Already you have all you want! 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!

Verses 8-10 are full of biting irony. The thrust of verse 8 is the repeated word 'already.' Their claim, clearly, was that everything they needed was already in their possession, here and now. It seems that many reckon that they have attained a spirituality superior to Paul's. They were already wealthy and prosperous, already reigning, and already kings in supreme authority. In short, the blessings of heaven were already theirs. What God had reserved for the end of time they were making their own already. But they still have a long way to go in that they are majoring upon their gifts rather than upon the Giver.

Throughout chapters 3 and 4 Paul's concern is to emphasize the Last Day, when the Lord will come and the fire reveals every man's work. But what Paul hopes for on that day, the Corinthians seemed to have been claiming was theirs already. Perhaps they used this argument to show just how superior they really were! They no longer had to hunger and thirst after righteousness; they were already glutted. They no longer needed to mourn over their spiritual poverty; they were rich. They were, in fact, claiming to be super-victorious, already embarked on their kingly reign, so they have no need to wait for eternity and no need to bother with Paul or the other inferior Christian messengers. All this makes the irony at the end of verse 8 devastatingly strong: 'and would that you did reign, that we might share the rule with you!'

Perhaps they had fallen prey to an early form of 'deeper life' or 'victorious Christian living' teaching. The church has been overrun with this type of emphasis in the past several years. The essence of it is simply that God doesn't intend His people to suffer or make sacrifices, but always to be robust in health, have plenty of money, and be free from struggles. Give the slightest hint these things are not true of you and you will be advised that you are lacking in faith and need to 'trust the Lord' or 'claim the victory.'

Paul's word 'already' splendidly captures what has been called 'realized eschatology,' the belief that the future has come into the present 'in Christ.' Yet there is a sharp tension. The kingdom has also 'not yet' come because Christ has 'not yet' come back and this is painfully evident in

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

the corruption, sin, and suffering which surrounds us, including within the church. The believer must affirm two realities, ‘already’ and ‘not yet,’ and live with the tension between them. The Corinthian Christians, however, were strong on the ‘already’ but weak about the ‘not yet.’ It appears that having been ‘made rich’ in Christ in ‘all speech’ and ‘all knowledge’ (1:5) – including the riches of ‘wisdom’ – the Corinthians have persuaded themselves that the kingdom of God has somehow, ‘already’ come. This over-emphasis on ‘already’ has been called ‘*over-realized eschatology*,’ and has reappeared throughout history in various experience-based Holy Spirit movements.

Paul says he and the other apostles were not finding the life of faith to be simple. They were not full, rich, or reigning. In wistful irony, he says the only wish it were all true and the Corinthians really were reigning! That would mean the battle was over and he could lay down his armor and reign too. Paul knew all too well that the battle was far from being over, and while the Corinthians were playing the part of conquering kings, he and the other apostles felt more like condemned prisoners.

2. What Paul Knows the Christian Life Is (4:9-13)

a) *A Spectacle to the World (4:9)*

⁹*For 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.*

‘Last of all’ or ‘endmost’ (*eschatous*, whence ‘eschatological’) may suggest prisoners destined to perish in a stadium, or captives dragged behind a procession and whose prospect is also death. ‘Death-sentenced’ (*epithanatiou*) tells us that Paul and some others are never far removed from a final blow to be struck by their adversaries (cp. 2 Cor. 4:9).

Paul uses a metaphor from the savagery of the gladiatorial arena. He says he has been ‘sentenced to death’ and been made ‘a spectacle’ (*theatron*, whence ‘theater’) to the ‘world’ (*kosmos*). This is as graphic as it is gruesome, showing how difficult life was for one who truly preached Christ crucified, relative to the soft and easy message of the ‘wisdom of this world,’ currently being touted in Corinth.

Paul envisages the procession of triumph coming into the Roman arena. The emperor, or one of his returning generals, rides in great victory into the amphitheater. His chariot was followed by a procession of chariots and soldiers. Unlike some of our great occasions, when the most important person enters last, at the end of a Roman triumph came the captured prisoners who were about to be thrown to the wild beasts, or to fight for their lives with the gladiators for the general amusement of the public. The crowd would cheer the general and his soldiers as they passed by and would jeer and taunt the poor prisoners as they filed past. The last ones brought out for slaughter were the grand finale. Now, says Paul, that is what apostolic life seems to me to be like. It is marked by public humiliation and denigration, both before men and angels. There could hardly be a greater contrast than that between the life of an apostle and the triumphalism of the Corinthian church.

b) *Fools for Christ’s Sake (4:10)*

¹⁰*We 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.*

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

This picture of the Christian life was so foreign to the Corinthians that Paul thought it necessary to flesh it out with details by summarizing the experiences of the apostles, which can be loosely gathered together in three categories. First, the apostles had to bear *personal indignities*. Being a prisoner meant one was regarded as a fool, weak, and without honor. Paul says the same was true of the apostles. While the Corinthians acted like wise, strong, and honorable kings, Paul and the other apostles had to be content to be considered ‘fools for Christ’s sake.’

To appreciate the irony of Paul’s statement, we need to recall 1:26-28, in which Paul reminded them that not many are ‘wise,’ ‘powerful,’ or ‘well born,’ and that God had chosen the ‘foolish things,’ the ‘weak things,’ and the ‘ignoble things.’ The irony of this verse rests on the fact that in a sense the Corinthians are indeed prudent, strong, and splendid – as is Paul; after all, they have accepted the apostle’s gospel. Their problem is that they ought to realize this to be the case, accepting that it is their lot to be deemed preposterous by an unenlightened world. Sadly, they are confident in exact proportion to their ignorance.

The apostle puts to them this implied question, ‘Which is the genuine article? Which is real Christianity?’ Or, as implied in verse 10, ‘Who looks more like Christ?’ It is a very searching question but not one that is hard to answer. At the heart of verse 9 is the scandal, or the stumbling block, of the cross. Paul does not merely follow a crucified Lord, it is the very heart of his message, and therefore of their faith. He is committed to the folly of God’s wisdom in the cross, to the weakness of His power, and the dishonor of His glory in the death that Jesus died for sinners. Whereas the Corinthians are choosing wisdom, strength, and honor in this world, Paul came with foolish wisdom, in weakness, fear, and much trembling, as he preached to them the gospel of God.

c) A Lifetime of Suffering (4:11-12a)

¹¹*To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless,*
¹²*and we labor, working with our own hands.*

Secondly, the apostles had to endure *physical deprivation*. Paul outlines his lifestyle, implying that the Corinthians ought to see him as a man of afflictions. The latent thesis of the section is that those who suffer for their Lord reign with Him – and are therefore wealthy and wise. Kings knew little or nothing about hunger, thirst, tattered clothes, rough treatment, homelessness, and hard work, but prisoners do. While the Corinthian believers were living like kings, the apostles were living like slaves. Paul engaged in ‘toil’ (*kopiaō*, ‘to work to the point of exhaustion’) with his ‘own hands,’ a kind of work considered by Greeks to be beneath their dignity. Manual work was for slaves.

The two ‘already’s’ of verse 8 are balanced by two other phrases in verse 11, ‘to the present hour,’ and verse 13, ‘and are still.’ Paul is purposefully talking about time, and not yet about eternity. But the contrast between verses 8 and 11 is immense. For the apostle, his present experience in the ‘now’ is one of brutal treatment and homelessness. This is hardly characteristic of someone who has come into the full inheritance of the children of God. Whether then it is physical suffering (v. 11), or hard toil (v. 12), these are the twin characteristics of Paul’s discipleship, focused as it was upon the cross. One suspects that the Corinthians were not really interested in either of these aspects.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

a) *The Scum of the World (4:12b-13)*

When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

Finally, the apostle had to tolerate *social ostracism*. Paul speaks of being reviled (*loidoreō*, ‘to abuse with words’), persecuted, slandered, and regarded as filth, like the stuff that is scoured off a dirty dish or pot. When he describes himself as ‘the scum of the world, the refuse of all things,’ he wants them to see how far they have fallen from apostolic priorities.

The Greek for ‘scum’ (*perikatharmata*) originally stood for an accumulation of dirt. Later, the term took on the meaning of filth that has to be removed by a cleansing agent. From this emerged the idea of purification through sacrifice (cp. Prov. 21:18). The term translated ‘offscourings’ or ‘refuse’ (*peripsēma*) means much the same – in this case the elimination of dirt by wiping a utensil, perhaps a dish, around its rim. Paul possibly introduces these words because a disdainful world regards him and his colleagues as obscenities to be cleansed away if it wants to be whole. Nor, is it implied, has this attitude been foreign to some at Corinth, which is why they tend to walk away from the apostle.

The two words ‘scum’ and ‘refuse’ are almost synonymous and were used for ‘rubbish swept up’ or ‘filth scraped off.’ The words were commonly used figuratively of the lowest, most degraded criminals, who often were sacrificed in pagan ceremonies. This is the way the world looked at the apostles. They were religious scum and dregs, and no better than the criminals like whom they were often treated.

Paul is pointing to the depth of his humiliation and suffering bringing the gospel to the Corinthians, who, by contrast, are not preaching and living the same message as Paul, ‘Jesus Christ and Him crucified,’ but rather some kind of ‘wisdom’ doctrine. They were not going to buy into being ‘reviled,’ ‘persecuted,’ and ‘slandered’ (vv. 12-13). That is why they resisted the gospel of the cross and the sort of Christian life that flows from it.

Paul’s language in verses 9-13 is extreme, but no exaggeration. His message of the cross was uncompromising but unwelcome wherever he went, whether to Jews or Greeks and Romans. He bore in his own body the very sufferings of his Lord in bringing the message of Jesus to the world.

One of the most important points this paragraph is making is that the miraculous wisdom and power of God are not seen in a popular church; the kind of church that is admired by the pagans, that carries all before it, is envied for its wealth and prestige, and puffed up by its own press releases. Rather, the power and wisdom of God is seen in those actions of response to the world’s hostilities, which characterized Paul’s own life. When a man is seen to respond as Paul did (‘we bless...we endure...we entreat’), knowing at the same time that it will not change the attitude of the opposition one iota, there the power of God is being demonstrated. When the apostle goes on being Christ’s fool, blessing others, enduring suffering, answering the most appalling cruelty with kindness, a miracle of immense proportions is taking place.

Are we like the Corinthians? Are we all swelled up with pride? If we are, it is because we have forgotten what grace and the Christian life is all about. Grace means there is nothing for us to boast about because everything we have has been given to us. The Christian life means we have

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

to face difficulties and trials. By all means, pray, trust, and rejoice, but never forget these things do not remove all the difficulties. They only give us strength in the midst of them.

We are not scum and dregs in God's sight, but we are nevertheless servants and stewards. Therefore neither in the world's eyes nor in God's eyes do we have reason to boast in ourselves. That which the Lord loves in His servants, and that which eventually will bring them reward and glory, is a humble and obedient spirit.

C. Apostolic Admonishment (1 Cor. 4:14-21)

For the final time in this section (chapters 1-4), Paul again changes the metaphor that he is employing in order to illustrate his life as a teacher. This time he refers to the relationship of a father with his child. The whole thrust of his argument depends upon the context of the loving, personal relationship that he has with the Corinthian Christians, created and experienced in and through the gospel. Here again, the power and wisdom of God are shown to be at work.

The apostle brings his examination of divisions within the church (1:10-4:21) towards a conclusion, his analysis being that their problems reflect a failure to appreciate the wisdom of his gospel, which for some has almost become a fad. In order to impress his message upon the church, Paul introduces the metaphor of the relationship between a father and his children: not only do the Corinthians need once more to embrace the gospel which he has brought to them, they must appreciate that their spiritual parent attained his apostolic status by the grace of God and that he desires no other standing.

In this passage, Paul abruptly changes his tone. The apostle has been stern, even to the point of sarcasm (4:8-10), in rebuking the Corinthians' sins. Now the storm of sarcasm subsides and is replaced by the gentle, soothing tones of a father reasoning with his erring children. Paul tells them why he has been so harsh: he loves them as a father loves his children. This section is an example of the characteristics Paul displayed as a spiritual father.

1. Spiritual Father (4:14-15)

¹⁴*I do not write these things 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.*

The first characteristic of the spiritual father is that he begets spiritual children. Many other preachers had come to Corinth and taught there, but Paul alone occupied the special place as the one through whom they were converted. Paul was not claiming to be the author of their faith, as though he had the power to save people. He knew, however, that God, in His wisdom, has chosen to use human instruments in the spreading of the gospel, and he was simply saying he had been that human agent in Corinth.

The apostle addressed them as 'my beloved children,' revealing his warm, affectionate concern that gives the lie to any suggestion that his irony is written out of irritation or pique. 'Beloved' is from the verb *agapaō*, which refers to the strongest kind of love, the deepest love. It is a love that is determined and willful, having the one purpose of serving the object of love.

The whole thrust of the paragraph is relational, and its purpose is clearly restorative. At the beginning, Paul assures them that his purpose is to 'admonish,' not to make them 'ashamed.'

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

Their good is his only motivation. ‘Admonish’ (*noutheteō*) means literally ‘to put in mind,’ with the purpose of warning and reproving. It presupposes that something is wrong and its intention is to correct, to make right. Its purpose is to bring about a change—in belief, attitude, habit, lifestyle, or in whatever way is needed. In fact, it is a warning to change or incur judgment.

His strong warning stems from the strength of his demonstrable, fatherly love for them. They may have ‘countless guides,’ innumerable pedagogues, countless teachers, who would help them on in the Christian faith, but they have only one spiritual father, and the apostle is not ashamed to draw on this special and unique relationship. Indeed, the warning is itself an expression of his love.

‘Countless’ (*murios*) can represent the specific figure of ten thousand (as in the KJV), or simply a great, numberless amount. ‘Tutors’ (*paidagōgos*) refers to home instructors, usually slaves, who were responsible for the basic training and moral upbringing of small children. They were not teachers in a formal sense but were more guardians and helpers.

Again he reminds them, ‘I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel,’ referring to the unique relationship established by God through their reception of the message. As Paul points out, you can only have *one* father. Timothy is coming to visit them as a brother, and is described in verse 17 as ‘my beloved and faithful child.’

Paul uses an exaggerated scenario, ‘Even if you had ten thousand tutors (*paidagōgoi*) you do not have many fathers.’ In a great man’s household there may have been numbers of ‘pedagogues,’ usually educated slaves who taught the children. But they did not bring about these children’s birth; only the father did that. The Corinthians have been visited by Apollos and Peter and now they have a number of local teachers. But these are mere ‘pedagogues.’ Only Paul is their father since he preached the gospel initially and, as it were, sowed the seed that bore fruit in their conversion to Christ. And because he is a father to his spiritual children, his relationship with them is uniquely authoritative.

2. Spiritual Example (4:16-17)

a) Paul

¹⁶*I urge you, then, be imitators of me.*

The second characteristic of the spiritual father is that he demonstrates the spiritual life. Just as it is natural for children to want to imitate their father, so it is quite natural for spiritual children to want to imitate their spiritual father. Paul was so confident of his own walk with the Lord that he could urge the Corinthians to imitate him. The old question just refuses to go away: ‘If every church member were just like me, what kind of church would this church be?’

A father’s love models a way of life for the children to follow. We often use the familiar phrase, ‘like father, like son.’ The Corinthians had been shown the nature of their spiritual father’s life in verses 11-13. Paul not only could say, ‘Do as I say,’ but also, ‘Do as I do.’ The Greek term is equivalent to our word ‘mimic.’

Paul frequently urges imitation of various aspects of his life and ministry (cp. 11:1; Phil. 3:17). What is it here that Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate in him? Paul is pointing to his example of preaching Christ and Him crucified as both the fundamental foundation as well as the

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

superstructure of the church. That certainly has been his emphasis to this point in the letter (cp. 1:17, 18, 23; 2:2). Closely connected is Paul's teaching on costly discipleship as set out in his own example just given (4:11-14).

b) Timothy

¹⁷*That is why I sent 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.*

It is possible, of course, for us to set a proper example, only to see our children obstinately refuse to follow it. The same holds true in the spiritual realm. The spiritual father can see his example completely disregarded by his children. The Corinthians were showing so many signs of being rebellious children that Paul thought it necessary to send Timothy to remind them that their spiritual father's ways were 'in Christ.' In refer to Timothy as his 'beloved and faithful son in the Lord,' Paul was deliberately contrasting Timothy with the Corinthians. In essence he was saying, 'I, your spiritual father, am sending a faithful son to all my rebellious sons to tell them to be faithful, too.'

Here in verse 17, the significant emphasis is added that this is not simply a matter of doctrine, or orthodox believe, but of daily lifestyle and consistent behavior. Timothy (a much-beloved son) is able to confirm to these other sons and daughters of Paul's ministry what the authentic gospel lifestyle consists of, and to testify that this has been Paul's constant behavior and message, wherever he goes. Timothy was so like Paul that he could be sent as a Pauline model. He was a replica. That is the epitome of raising spiritual children: being able to send them to work in our place. Paul loved Timothy and commended him as a faithful child who would bring back to mind the Christlike life pattern of Paul, because it was also his own life pattern.

Paul has sent Timothy from Ephesus, probably via the overland route. From a comparison of this passage with 16:10-11, it appears that he is uncertain whether his colleague will be given a friendly welcome: a church that busily examines Paul (4:3) might be even less charitable towards his associate. This is probably why Timothy is commended warmly.

For their greater understanding of his 'ways,' which they appear to have forgotten, Paul is sending them the faithful 'beloved son' Timothy to visit them (cp. 16:10-11). For these 'ways' are what Paul teaches everywhere in the network of Gentile churches in Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia. He is not pressing on them things different from his teachings he expects to be followed in 'every church.'

3. Spiritual Power (4:18-21)

In the third place, the spiritual father also exercises spiritual discipline. Verse 18-21 both rebuke and threaten discipline to the Corinthian church should his warnings and exhortations be ignored.

a) The Rebuke (4:18-19)

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.*

As the section ends, Paul zeroes in on the small group ('some') who are the cause of all his trouble. They have become 'arrogant' or 'puffed up.' He uses the same word as in verse 6 (*phusioō*), which has at root the idea of being self-inflated. They thought they could get by with doing as they pleased. They may have been so arrogant as to think Paul would not dare to confront them. Doubtless they had decided they did not need a visit from Paul, but he affirms his

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

intention to come very soon, unless God prevents him, and then the real situation would be exposed for what it was.

Paul appears to be hinting at the unnamed teacher or teachers of ‘wisdom’ against whom, in effect, the whole letter to this moment has been addressed. These have risen up in the church ‘as if Paul were not intending to return to Corinth.’ Apparently they have said to themselves, ‘Paul is not returning to Corinth. The church is ours. Now we can teach what we like.’

In short, it was hoped, by some at least, that the church in Corinth would no longer be a ‘Pauline’ church, that their church would be taken out of his network of churches. This is ‘*the Corinthian error.*’ It is the error of rejecting Paul’s authority as an apostle to direct the faith and behavior of the churches. This is also very common today. Many churches look to the Gospels, but downgrade Paul. A Gospel has a narrow goal, to inform readers about Jesus, His life and the teachings He gave in the context of Galilee and Judea, and to call for repentance and faith. The Letters of the New Testament, however, address a breadth of day-to-day issues in the churches, including the churches of the Gentiles where different problems were encountered from those in the Jewish churches.

The usurpers in Corinth will have no comfort. Paul is planning to return to Corinth in the near future (cp. 16:3-7), and for an extended visit. In the meantime, Paul is sending Timothy sometime in the near future. When he adds, ‘If the Lord wills,’ he is acknowledging the sovereignty in and over history of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul quite appropriately made plans, as we all need to do, but he understood clearly that such plans are subject to a greater plan and a higher will (cp. James 4:13-17). More than once he had made plans for his ministry that he was not able to carry out.

So, if and when Paul reaches Corinth, he will ‘know’ the ‘power’ (*dynamis*), the true capacity, of those who are ‘inflated,’ rather than their ‘word’ (*logos*), and of those who retain an exaggerated opinion of themselves (cp. 2:4-5). He would not let their sinning go unchallenged. For their own sakes, as well as the gospel’s, he could not fail to discipline them. An undisciplined child belongs to parents who do not deeply care about his welfare.

The best way to humble a proud big-mouth is to show him up. Paul promised to do exactly that to his readers by first coming to them. Once there, Paul would stop them from talking themselves up by investigating, not their puffed up words, but their ‘power.’ This means he was going to set about to determine whether their lives matched up to their talk.

b) The Principle (4:20)

²⁰*For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.*

Paul gives his own ‘wise’ saying against these men as an explanation. Literally it is, ‘The kingdom of God is not *word* but *power.*’ This has been taken to mean—wrongly—that miracles (‘power’) is what the Kingdom of God is about, not preaching (‘word’). Thus preaching and evangelism is seen to be power-less, but miracles as powerful. But this fails to understand Paul’s teaching in the context of the four chapters of which verses 18-21 are the climax. The ‘word’ that Paul speaks of is the ‘wisdom of this world’ spoken by these ‘puffed up’ usurpers in Corinth. What *is* ‘powerful’ is Paul’s preaching of the word of the cross (1:17). The message of Christ crucified is the power of God which saves people (1:18, 22). Paul is not even thinking about miracles when he refers to power, but rather of the power of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, which is the only message he preached when present in Corinth (2:2).

1 Corinthians – Lesson 7

‘The kingdom of God’ signifies the complete church on earth throughout this age rather than that in heaven or at the end following the return of Christ, ‘kingdom’ standing for the manifestation of Christ’s power in the world at large (cp. 15:24). Paul implies that the churches, not depending ultimately upon their own resources, are maintained by their God.

The kingdom of God *is* all about power, but about God’s power, not man’s. Words are cheap, and those who talk most about power do not necessarily demonstrated it at all. One of the problems at Corinth is that they were very impressed with words, but when all the argument and discussion was over and done, where was the power of God to be seen at work among them? Paul’s answer is, by now, very familiar to us. The power of God is demonstrated in the message of Jesus Christ crucified, which alone saves people. That power is secondarily revealed in a reviled and persecuted apostle, cursed and slandered, but insisting on pursuing his gospel ministry.

c) The Challenge (4:21)

²¹*What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?*

The rebuke concludes with a challenge. Paul could come to them prepared to whip them into shape, or he could come (as he would prefer), as their spiritual father in love and gentleness. His response will depend upon how they themselves will react to this letter. The choice was up to them. If they are willing to repent of their pride, their false triumphalism, their short-sightedness, premature judgments, and arrogant fault-finding, then they will find the apostle, like the God who welcomes sinners, more than willing to turn to them in forgiveness and mercy.

The long section 1:10-4:21 closes with an appeal to all the Corinthians rather than to the ‘some’ of 4:18 who oppose him. The ‘stick’ develops the father-children metaphor introduced at 4:14, but is not meant to imply that when Paul meets the church there will be anything other than love in his heart. ‘Spirit’ probably signifies the apostle’s spirit rather than the Holy Spirit.

As it happens, things turned out very differently than Paul planned. Timothy arrived sometime after the letter (16:10), but found a church in crisis. He returned to Ephesus and reported to Paul, who immediately came to Corinth, for what he called his ‘painful’ visit (2 Cor. 2:1). Even Paul himself could not bring the church to order, provoking their jibe that ‘his letters are weighty and strong but his bodily presence is weak and his speech is of no account’ (2 Cor. 10:10). Indeed, so serious were the difficulties in the Corinthian church that it would take many months to set things in order. Upon his return to Ephesus he wrote a further letter, the so-called ‘letter written in tears’ (2 Cor. 2:2-4; 7:8-13), which has not survived. Titus (not Timothy) was the bearer of this letter to the Corinthians. Then, forced from Ephesus by the silversmith’s riot, Paul traveled to Troas, then on to Macedonia where eventually he was reunited with Titus and, based on his latest reports, wrote our Second Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:8-10; 2:12-13; 7:5-7; Acts 19:21-20:1). Paul’s final visit to Corinth, lasting several months (Acts 20:2-3), would be needed before problems in this turbulent church were resolved.

This first part of the letter (1:10 – 4:21) is both an introduction and a foundation, and, paradoxically, almost an apologia for what is to appear in the following chapters. Paul has asserted his office, his authority, his determination, his love, and the centrality of Christ, the divine *sophia*, whom he has proclaimed at Corinth. Now he will particularize about volcanic issues which rock the church.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.