

Proud Sectarians or Humble Imitators?

(1 Corinthians 4:6-21)

At the root of the factions in Corinth was a misunderstanding of the Gospel's divine wisdom and power and a misunderstanding of nature of the Gospel's messengers. The moral issue of pride was also present, which Paul now addresses, directly, then with sarcasm, and finally with a call to their responsibility to imitate Christ.

I. Reflection (4:6-7)

1. *Reflect on the illustration of Paul and Apollos. – It was intended for them!* Having focused on Apollos and himself chapter 3, Paul reveals it to have been an illustration for their benefit.
→ It was correct to find application for us in the earlier chapters, since it aligns with Paul's intent. We may as well look toward others to find both good and bad examples (cf. Ch. 11; Hebrews 11).
2. *Reflect on the binding nature of Scripture. – Nothing new was being taught!* "Learn" means learning and practicing which is taught. It requires humble submission, an unpopular quality. Paul used a probably well-known saying to remind the Corinthians that their actions and beliefs were bound by the moral standards and teaching of the Bible which teaches humility and warns against pride and teaches the glory of God and depths of His wisdom. Paul concludes "then you would not take pride in one man over against another."
→ All God's principles of wisdom and the moral standards are true. To ignore them will bring problems.
3. *Reflect on the logic of their situation – They were not acting in accord with the facts!* Paul poses three questions which challenge the logic of their situation. The first reminds them that no one made one believer special over other believers and children of God are only special because God made them so. The second recalls that everything we have comes as a gift from God. The final question points to the stupidity of boasting in that for which we did nothing.
→ Guard against boasting in that for which we have done nothing. All that we have – in the church, in our families, in our jobs, whatever! – is a gift from God.

II. Reality check (4:8-13)

- Paul sarcastically calls the Corinthians to check their perspective on reality.
1. *Their perspective was distorted because of their overinflated self-evaluation.* They considered themselves fully satisfied, rich, having become kings, wise in Christ, strong, and honored (vv. 8, 10). But they were not and even the apostles would not make such claims.
→ Christians today make the same mistake when they misapply promises of Scripture.
 2. *God's true messengers experienced a different reality than that which the Corinthians imagined for themselves.* Paul correctly distinguished present-day suffering from future glory. He attributed his "bad" experiences to his good God. He recognized a broad audience, the whole universe, both angels and men (vs 9). Cf. 1 Peter 1:12; 1 Tim 5:21; Eph 6.
→ It is not about us and our immediate desires. God's plans are long-term, has His glory in mind and the whole universe as an audience.
 3. *If the Corinthians would have considered it, the teaching and life of Christ provided the ultimate reality.* Paul will imply this in vs 17 "my way of life in Christ." He experienced what Jesus said to expect (cf. Matthew 10:24-25; John 15:20) and obeyed what Jesus taught (cf. Lk 6:27-28; Mt 16:24). The Corinthians instead claimed satisfaction when there should have been spiritual hunger, riches when they should have acknowledged poverty, and imagined themselves kings while being displaced persons.
→ The spiritual appetite of many Christians today is almost non-existent and do not hunger and thirst after God (cf. Ps 42:1.) Worldly desires lead to error. The Biblical reality of the Christian life is different.

III. Responsibility (4:14-21)

Paul's sarcastic words may have seemed like an attempt to shame the Corinthians. But Paul assures them that it was not his purpose, but he wanted them to fulfil their responsibility to follow Christ fully.

1. *He admonished them on the basis of his relationship to them to fulfil this responsibility (14-15).* "Warn" refers to corrective instruction. Its noun form is used for a father's instruction of his children (Eph 6:4). Building on this nuance he claims this relationship spiritually, thereby expressing his love and pointing to their obligation to him. Others were guardians, household servants responsible for the training of the children, but without the same relationship.
2. *He offered them his own life as a pattern to follow, as he followed Christ (16-17).* Paul was not seeking his own followers but offering a model to follow as he imitated Christ (cf. 11:1). Timothy would help as a further model and one to explain Paul's consistent teaching on the matter.
→ A great help in following Christ is to have a practical example which communicates more than theory, demonstrates commitment, establishes feasibility, and encourages.
3. *Paul placed his confidence in the power and wisdom of Christ whereby he charged obedience (18-21).* The Christian life is more than the talk which the Corinthians liked so much. The true follower of Christ shows the power of God through a changed life. The kingdom of God, which will come in power and be ruled in power, shows its power now as sinners become citizens and are changed (cf. Col. 1:13). The manner in which Paul would next visit Corinth would depend upon their response.

Pride appears to have been a crucial part of the factious spirit in Corinth. By trying to re-work the message or re-shape the messengers they acted as if they knew better than God. We do the same when we step away from the clear statements and instructions of Scripture. Only God can change lives. We are to submit to His wisdom and trust His power. That brings glory to God and He alone is worthy. It is our choice. Will we be proud sectarians, seeking adherents to our teachings, or will we humbly submit to imitating a life in Christ?