

**United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
Calling for the Corinthians' Repentance (1 Cor. 4:14-21)**

Intro: In our lessons so far we've seen that the Corinthian church was divided because they were being influenced by values that were a part of their culture. Because they weighed the wisdom of their teachers by human standards (what they knew and how they spoke) they had resorted to comparing teachers and divisions resulted from their loyalty to those who had taught them. Paul has methodically and powerfully laid the groundwork to correct their mistaken perspective.

He begins by pleading for unity on the basis of God's wisdom in Christ and His cross and urges them not to divide over men based on human wisdom (1:10-17).

He urges them to understand that God did not save them by human wisdom, but by what human wisdom could have never conceived—by the message of the cross (1:18-25).

He points out that God saved them in that way in order that He might eliminate the kind of human glorying and boasting that they were practicing (1:26-31).

Consequently Paul points out that his preaching in Corinth was in harmony with God's wisdom. He determined to know nothing but Christ, and to speak, not with words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and power (2:1-5).

However to say that men like Paul and Apollos did not speak with human wisdom did not mean that the message they preached was not wise. The Corinthians needed to understand that the message that Paul and Apollos preached was God's wisdom revealed by the Holy Spirit (2:6-16).

Likewise they needed to understand that the messengers of the gospel were God's servants and they should not divide over them. Or to put it another way, the Corinthian church was God's field and God's temple (3:1-9).

Consequently Paul uses the occasion to offer a word of warning to both those who would seek to build the temple of God or to those who would seek to tear it down (3:10-16).

Finally as the chapter three closes Paul brings together the themes of these three chapters into a summary exhortation and observation urging the Corinthians to put things in proper perspective (3:18-23). They did not belong to their favorite teacher; instead all the teachers belonged to them; but they should remember that all things belong to Christ and God.

As we come to chapter four Paul's tone changes dramatically. He becomes much more confrontational. Having laid the Scriptural groundwork for his remarks, he now applies them personally and powerfully to the Corinthians. He must counter the Corinthians' judgment of himself, deflate the Corinthians' pride, and call for the Corinthians' repentance.

He counters the Corinthian's judgment by reminding them of His ultimate accountability to God's judgment (4:1-5)

He seeks to deflate the Corinthian's pride by comparing their presumed condition with that of those who taught them (4:6-13).

Now let's hear Paul's final word to the Corinthians on this topic:

I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness? (1 Cor. 4:14-21)

In this section Paul's tone changes once again and we hear him tenderly appealing to the Corinthians to repent of their attitudes. How does Paul seek to do this?

He reminds them that he is their spiritual father.

I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. (1 Cor. 4:14-15)

In a Greco-Roman household a child might have many "tutors" or slaves that were charged with supervising their instruction; but they had only one father. Paul claims that this is the relationship he has had with the Corinthians.

Various men had taught at Corinth (Apollon, possibly Peter); but these were not the first men to arrive there. Paul was!

Paul begot the Corinthians through the preaching of the gospel.

Consequently they were his spiritual children in Christ or in the faith.

Paul is not contradicting what Jesus taught in Mt. 23 when he said, "Call no man father upon the earth." When Jesus said "call no man father" he was addressing the problem of assuming spiritual titles that exalt oneself over others. However in this text, Paul is using a figure of speech to establish his unique relationship with the Corinthians. There is no justification in this verse for the Catholic use of the word "father" as a spiritual title for their priests. There is justification for one who has taught others to feel a special connection based on the work he has done and to act out of that relationship.

Paul uses his unique relationship as justification for his actions toward them. He is frank about his intentions.

It is clear that the things Paul had said in the previous paragraph would likely have shamed the Corinthians for their pride; yet Paul writes that he did not write it for that purpose.

Paul wrote simply to admonish the Corinthians just as a father would his own children—i.e. because he was their father and he loved them! As Morris interestingly points out the word “admonish” here is related to the term for a father’s “admonition” in the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Now based on this relationship:

He exhorts them to follow his example.

I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. (1 Cor. 4:16-17)

Paul was not being presumptuous in the least to ask the Corinthians to imitate him.

First that’s what fathers have a right to expect.

Second Paul wrote these words as an apostle of Jesus Christ, to whom had been entrusted the truth of the gospel.

Third Paul was not asking them merely to follow him; but to follow him as he was following Christ (Cf. 11:1).

Paul purposed to send Timothy to remind them of what he had already taught them.

When Paul uses the expression “my ways in Christ,” he is not suggesting that these were his own opinions. Since children follow the “ways” of their fathers, Paul accommodates the figure by speaking of his “ways;” but he adds a most important qualifier “which are in Christ.” In other words, Paul’s instruction came with the authority of Christ behind it.

Paul also notes that because his ways are “in Christ,” he may freely teach them in all congregations.

But as the Corinthians’ spiritual father, Paul also has access to one other mode of instruction. If they will not follow his example:

He threatens them with the possibility of discipline.

Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness? (1 Cor. 4:18-21)

In some ways the Corinthians were like disobedient children who thought their “father” was either too weak or preoccupied to discipline them. Paul affirms that he is neither. They have been mistaken in believing he was afraid to come to them or that he could not stand up to their attacks.

Paul affirms that he had “power” in addition to words which he could use to prove to the Corinthians that he meant business. Paul could come with a “rod.” He could deal with them much more severely. But Paul surely would have wanted to come with a different spirit. Thus, his final appeal: “Shall I come with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness?”

Application of this text

What did it mean to the Corinthians?

Paul’s points are designed to get the Corinthians to make the needed changes or else face the consequences.

How can we apply it?

This paragraph also offers insight into how those who teach may approach their students.

First it should be duly noted that modern teachers do not possess the authority of apostles. They do not give inspired sermons or classes. But having said that, it is important to note Paul’s fatherly approach.

Those who teach should do so out of love and the best interest of God’s family, not merely out of self-serving motivations.

Those who teach need to ask themselves, “Do I approach others with love and a gentle spirit? Would I be afraid to speak out strongly against wrong behavior, if my job was on the line?”

This paragraph also offers insight into how those who are taught might view their teachers.

Perhaps some have grown up in a culture where preachers were supposed to be mostly mad in the pulpit, using every occasion to angrily censure either the church or those not members of it. But is there any justification for this as a standard approach to people? Must preacher give every one a whipping every service?

What would your attitude be if it became necessary for a teacher to oppose rebellion against God’s will strongly? Would you be alright with it? Or would that be the day that teacher was no longer your man?

Of course we should also remember that the goal of all instruction, however delivered, is to secure obedience to the Lord.

Those who teach need to model the commands of the Lord.

And those who hear need to respect the authority of the Lord behind the message.

And if we are out of the will of God we need to repent!

This paragraph offers us insight into the hermeneutics of “approved apostolic example.”

Many today question the concept of establishing authority for religious practice by such means. Yet Paul explicitly urged the Corinthians to follow his example and suggested that Timothy would teach his ways which were in Christ.

Also this text suggests a means by which we may identify those areas which are matters of apostolic revelation. We will see evidence of uniformity in the churches. If, for example, we see churches uniformly meeting on the first day to observe the Lord's Supper, we may safely conclude that this teaching would be a part of Paul's ways in Christ.

Conclusion: I'm not sure I could think another text in Scripture that more beautifully deals with the issues that exist between the teacher and the taught in all its many aspects. But we should not lose sight of the ultimate goal of Paul's teaching on these matters. It is that God's people might avoid the divisions that often occur through preacher comparisons and that instead they might be agreed, perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgment based on Christ and His message of salvation.