

To Exalt Christ

To Equip, Encourage, Exhort and Edify God's Elect

The Church Conflicted – 1 Corinthians 4:8-21

The Comparison – The Caution – The Coming

Paul opened chapter 4 by speaking of himself, Apollos and Peter as servants of Christ and having been entrusted with the secret things of God. The secret things comprise the gospel. That is what Paul was sent to preach and teach and write. So, he was not good at keeping secrets. But neither was he to keep it secret so it would benefit all of us. It was the foundation he had carefully laid as an expert builder and which others, such as Apollos and Peter had built upon at Corinth.

However, he felt that he and his team were being judged by the church at Corinth. For Paul the only judgment that mattered was the Lord's judgment when he comes.

Paul cautioned them to *“not go beyond what was written.”* 4:6. This meant to not add or take away anything from the gospel he had given them. Paul had done neither. He had kept the gospel just to what he had received, nothing more, nothing less. In 2 Peter 3:15 Peter testified that *“Paul also wrote with the wisdom that God gave him.”* He wrote with that wisdom given him by God and nothing more, which meant that he neither added nor subtracted anything from the *“secret things of God”*. 4:1.

In verse 6 Paul said he had applied those same rules to himself and to Apollos which undoubtedly included Peter as well. He was not therefore demanding something of them that he had not applied to himself. That way they learn from what he practiced that you *“Do not go beyond what is written”* which also means, to not go beyond what is revealed by God.

In verse 7 Paul said that they were to be no different from anyone else and asked them – *“What do you have that you did not receive?”* John Calvin, our Presbyterian grandfather had said – *“The true foundation of Christian modesty is this – not to be self-complacent, [i.e., smug] as knowing that we are empty and void of everything good – that if God has implanted in us anything that is good, we are so much more the debtors of his grace.”*

“What do you have that you did not receive?” To receive is to be given something. In this case, as Calvin points out, it is God’s grace expressed in the gospel that they have received. Grace was part of that foundation of faith that Paul laid at the start of his letter. He would tell the church at Ephesus that *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.”* 2:8. We are all debtors of the grace of God. That should put us in a place of thankfulness and humility and that we all, including the Corinthians, stand on level ground at the cross, with no one above or below anyone else.

That is what it should have been for the Corinthians but, as we shall see, that was not the case as we continue in chapter 4. At the end of chapter 3 he told them that all things are theirs and that they are of Christ. That should have made a difference but it did not. What this will bring out is the fact that as Paul stated earlier, they are still worldly. They are still being sanctified by the inner work of the Holy Spirit as are we all.

They appear to be holding themselves in high esteem in regard to their salvation, even boasting about it. They are elevating themselves above the apostles. Paul will endeavour to level the ground and make the Corinthians see that they are all equal in the sight of God. One is not greater than another in terms of their salvation and God’s saving power. Paul does not want the church conflicted in any way. That is what he sees and he strives to remedy it. So, we begin with the comparison.

The Comparison - 1 Corinthians 4:8-13

Paul draws a comparison, a contrast between the Corinthians and the three apostles. Throughout verses 8-13 Paul uses the pronoun “we” multiple times in 6 verses to indicate the three church builders are Paul, Apollos and Peter.

In verse 8 he tells the Corinthians, – *“Already you have all that you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you.”* They have everything they could want but they have become as Calvin said – *“self-complacent,”* They have become smug, self-satisfied. They have however attained this smugness *“without us”*, says Paul, i.e., without Paul and his team.

Calvin in his commentary paraphrases Paul as saying – *“For Apollos and I are now esteemed nothing by you, though it is by our instrumentality that the Lord has conferred everything upon you.”* Calvin is right. The key word Calvin uses is *“instrumentality.”*

God used Paul and Apollos and Peter as his servants, his instruments to bring the gifts of salvation and grace, IOW the gospel to the Corinthians. Paul is not putting himself or his two fellow workers above them but is rightfully acknowledging that they were the instruments God used to preach and reach them, to confer the gospel upon them.

They however have elevated themselves above the apostles. Paul declares that they have become rich and have become kings in the metaphorical sense as a sign of their smugness. Then in verse 9 Paul begins his comparison of the three apostles with those in the Corinthian church. Paul gives us a bird’s eye view of the conflict that occurred in that congregation. We know from Paul’s own testimony that they are *“still worldly”*. (3:3). They still had old baggage, their old self in tow.

Back at the start of chapter 1 Paul had said in his opening address to the church in verse 2 – *“To the church of God in Corinth, to those*

sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.” They had been converted by the preaching of the gospel but they were still being sanctified, made holy, still attaining to the full image of Christ.

When building a house there are stages to its construction. It is no different when God begins to build us into a *spiritual house* as Peter called it or a *temple* as Paul put it. There is order to how one builds and there is order to one’s salvation. God we know is the God of order and not chaos. Chaos seemed to be the order of the day in Corinth.

So, it is understandable that these Corinthians are still in the sanctifying stage of God’s building plan. Paul will explain shortly why he does this comparison between himself and the apostles and these new, still growing-in-the-faith Corinthian Christians.

In verse 9 for example Paul wrote – *“For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.”* Here Paul uses extreme language, hyperbole to accentuate the differences, draw out the comparison much like Jesus did on occasion to make a point.

In Matthew 18:8-9 for example, Jesus said – *“If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away...and if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.”* Jesus used hyperbole, exaggeration to indicate how serious sin was and its ramifications for one to enter the kingdom of God.

Paul begins with the same kind of language. They are of high estate while in comparison, those God used as instruments, as servants of Christ, those entrusted with the gospel and who proved faithful are treated shamefully, *“a spectacle to the whole universe.”* 4:9.

Paul continued his comparison with the apostles being *“fools for Christ”*, them being wise in Christ; the apostles being weak, them being strong; the apostles being dishonoured, them being honored. The apostles

hungry and thirsty, in rags, brutally treated, homeless, working hard, cursed, persecuted and slandered. Did Paul just make up all these things? No.

In his second letter to the Corinthians in 11:21b-33, Paul detailed the many things that he suffered truly, authentically and endured for the sake of the gospel. They are, like this list, very descriptive – *“imprisoned, beaten, flogged, exposed to death, shipwrecked, in danger, labored and toiled.”* Paul was not exaggerating but they would not learn of these things until his second letter. When Paul was commissioned in Acts 9:15-16 Jesus said this about Paul – *“This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”* Every word of Jesus’ commissioning came true. What he said to the church was not hyperbole but honest, lived-out experience. So why did Paul make this comparison. It was written to warn them, to caution them.

The Caution – 1 Corinthians 4:14-17

In verse 14 Paul explains why he did this comparison of the apostles and the Corinthians. He wrote – *“I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.”* He wrote to warn them, to caution them about what they are doing that is causing, jealousy, quarrels, division, conflict. He wants to caution them about their pride, the smugness they are taking in their salvation because they believe they had done it without the instrumentality of Paul and Apollos and Peter.

He addresses them as his dear children which is setting them up to know him as their father in the faith. In verse 15 Paul wrote – *“Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.”*

A guardian generally will not have the same concern or care that a father would have for their own child. IOW, they have all these fellow

believers around them, but if they are fooling around with the gospel call then that theological foundation Paul laid is being compromised.

Paul lays it out before them that *“in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.”* Through the preaching and teaching of the gospel he fathered them. According to Acts 18:11 Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth. In that period of time, he had ample opportunity to preach and teach and mentor those in the new church he had established. Therefore, we can understand his concern when he learned about what was happening. He had become very much their spiritual father.

On that basis he wrote in verse 16 – *“Therefore I urge you to imitate me.”* A good father, a good mother, a good preacher will be that imitative example as they live out their own gospel call as did Paul. Despite all that Paul genuinely suffered for Christ he never caved, but continued to work and suffer for the betterment of those he had preached the gospel to and whom the Lord in his grace brought to faith in Jesus Christ.

He does not just leave them with advice, but in verse 17 he says he will send an advisor – *“For this reason I am sending to you, Timothy my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.”*

Paul genuinely cares about his children, those who have come to faith by God’s instrumentality through him. Paul says that Timothy is going to testify to them how he lives in and for Christ and why they should imitate him. It is because he imitates Christ.

Timothy was not his biological son, but his theological son. Paul mentored Timothy and considered his faith to be sincere, real, true and which lived in him. 2 Timothy 1:5. He was, *“faithful in the Lord.”* Paul is therefore sending Timothy as his testifier but that is not all that Paul is going to do for this church.

The Coming – 1 Corinthians 4:18-21

Paul is sending Timothy **and** he himself is also coming. In verses 18-19 Paul said – *“Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have.”* What is at stake here is the public witness of the church and thus the gospel itself. What is at stake is the spiritual health of the people, due to the influence of those who are causing conflict and division. There is also the purity and preservation of the gospel, what the church believes, knows and rests on.

It very much warrants therefore Paul coming. He wrote in verse 20 – *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.”* The gospel points to the kingdom of God as the destination for those saved by the gospel. So, the word, the preaching, the talk of the gospel, its worth and truth are proven in the power that comes from the kingdom of God and his power. As Paul said at the start of his letter – *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* It is the power of God to save the individual with, as Calvin comments on verse 20, – *“the internal power of the Holy Spirit.”* Amen. **Soli Deo Gloria.**