

LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: 1 CORINTHIANS

Week 6: The Authority of Leaders

ANALYSIS

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(4:6) Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other.

With this sentence Paul proceeds to tell the Corinthians expressly why he has been using the various preceding analogies about himself and Apollos. It was “for your benefit,” he tells them, which is then spelled out more fully in the rest of the verse. Paul’s main point is the final clause: “Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against another.”

“These things” (“I have applied these things”) refer to the various images that have made up the argument, beginning at 3:5 and continuing to 4:5. Paul has gone from illustration to illustration, changing images as he went along, but always intending them as he now says, to apply “to myself and Apollos.” In other words, in case they have somehow missed it, he now expressly tells them that he has been carrying on the argument with its various images about himself and Apollos so that they might *learn* something and as a result desist from their current “pride in persons.”

(4:7) For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

The “for” that connects these questions with v. 6 indicates that Paul is about to give reasons why those who are “puffed up” against him are wrong. Their pride in persons reflects a lack of proper perspective and a lack of gratitude. With these questions Paul is trying to give them a proper perspective.

There is some debate as to how to translate the first question, which in the NIV reads: “who made you different from anyone else?” This question is directly related to v. 6 and their pride in relation to Paul. The question means, “Who distinguishes you?” or, “Who concedes you any superiority?” Thus Paul is asking the Corinthians on what possible grounds are they boasting in this manner. The implication is that their boasting in wisdom, which allows them to “examine” Paul, is strictly self-proclaimed.

The second question marks it as ungrateful —“What do you have that you did not receive?” If we are honest we will recognize that everything that one “has” is a gift.

In case the Corinthians miss the point, Paul drives the second question home with a third, which assumes the answer “nothing” to the second: “And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” Their “boasting” is sure evidence that they have missed the gospel of grace. Instead of recognizing everything as a gift and being filled with gratitude, they *possessed* their gifts—saw them as their own—and looked down on the apostle who seemed to lack so much.

(2) His appeal to his experience as an apostle, 4:8–13

(4:8) Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you!

As a contrast to the attitude of gratitude and humility urged by the rhetorical questions of v. 7, Paul now begins a series of contrasts between the Corinthians and himself to which shame is the only suitable response. With three short sentences, Paul goes straight to the heart of the matter. The words are full of biting irony, attacking their own view of themselves, and not just their pride in general, but specifically their view of spirituality, which reflects an “overrealized” eschatology.

Irony has two basic meanings: (1) What we might call an ironic situation. This is a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what is or might be expected or considered appropriate; e.g., an irony that the firehouse burned down. (2) What we might call ironic speech. A method of humorous or subtly sarcastic expression in which the intended meaning of the words used is the direct opposite of their usual sense; e.g., the irony of calling a stupid plan clever. Light irony of this latter kind is a form of humor, severe irony is usually a form of sarcasm or satire. This is what we have in v. 8.

Having received the Spirit, the Corinthians feel that they have already arrived; for them spirituality means to have been transported into a whole new sphere of existence where they are “above” the earthly, and especially “fleshly,” existence of others. Thus, Paul says, “already you have all you want.” Not only do they boast in what is a gracious gift, but they are satiated with their gifts, including wisdom. Secondly, Paul says, “Already you have become rich,” a second metaphor for spiritual giftedness. Thirdly, Paul says, “you have begun to reign.” The words “without us” mean “without our having a share in it.” The final sentence brings things into perspective. “How I wish that you really had begun to reign”; that would mean that the kingdom that we all await had in fact truly come.

(4:9) For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.

Paul has not in fact entered the time of reigning, and neither by implication have the Corinthians. Paul first sets forth in its starkest form the evidence that he and the other apostles have not yet begun to reign. To do so he uses the figure of those condemned to die in the arena.

When Paul says that the apostles were “put...on display at the end of the procession,” he is using an image drawn from the Roman triumph, in which a conquering general staged a splendid parade that included not only his armies but the booty as well.

(4:10) We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored!

Paul now contrasts the Corinthians and himself (and other apostles) with total irony. The majority of the Corinthians are not among the “wise, powerful, or honored”; but they are acting as if they were.

(4:11) To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. (4:12) We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; (4:13) when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

Paul now abandons irony for straight talk. Verses 11–13 spell out in detail the “dishonor” that attends Paul’s apostolic ministry. Paul’s list can be divided into three parts: (1) a list of six commonplace items, expressing the missionary’s deprivations and ill-treatment (vv. 11–12a): “we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands.”; (2) a set of three contrasts, expressing the apostle’s responses to his ill-treatment (vv. 12b–13a): “when we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure (it); when we are slandered, we answer kindly”; (3) a final extreme metaphor of humiliation: “we have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world.” We who follow Christ in these ways, Paul says, do not receive the accolades of the worldly wise. To the contrary, we are to them “the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world.”

(3) His appeal to his authority as their spiritual father, 4:14–21

The argument that began in 1:10 is now finished; but Paul is not. The most delicate issue still remains: In light of all that has been said, how is he to reestablish his authority over the Corinthians? Paul’s solution involves another change of illustrations. The imagery of father and children has all the needed ingredients.

(4:14) I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children.

In light of the irony and sarcasm of the preceding paragraph, how can Paul now deny that he was intending to “shame” them?

(4:15) Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

Having called them his “dear children” in v. 14, Paul proceeds to remind them that he is their father because he gave them birth “in Christ Jesus...through the gospel.” He also emphasizes that his relationship to them is unique in this regard—he is their *only* father. We might translate the first part of v. 15 this way: “Even though you may end up having countless thousands of guardians in Christ, at least you do not have many fathers.”

(4:16) Therefore I urge you to imitate me.

This verse now takes the father-child imagery a step further. Since the Corinthians have but one father, Paul, who gave them birth in Christ Jesus through the gospel, he urges them to imitate him.

(4:17) For this reason I have sent 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's concern over the Corinthians' behavior expressed in the preceding verses, especially his desire that they follow his example, is now given as the reason for Paul's having sent Timothy to them.

(4:18) Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you.

In the context of his own anticipated coming, Paul concludes the long section begun in 1:10 by sounding a warning directly at the troublemakers in the church. The words "some of you have become arrogant" indicate at least two things: First, the trouble that Paul has been having comes from within the church itself, not from outside agitators. Some in the church are decidedly anti-Paul. Second, although the entire church has been infected, probably in varying degrees, the instigators of the trouble are a smaller group among them. They have had considerable influence on the entire church, so that the majority are on the side of these malcontents, or at least are being influenced by them. Now at the end of the argument Paul singles out the ringleaders and threatens them with his own coming.

Paul adds the qualifying clause "as if I were not coming to you." His failure to return after some years had caused some of them to treat him with contempt, as if he were not coming back to them at all.

(4:19) 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. (4:20) For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.

The sending of Timothy and this letter might have the force of playing right into the hands of the "arrogant," so Paul quickly affirms his own plans to return to Corinth. The details of this plan are given in 16:5–9. That passage also indicates that "very soon" is a relative term. He will come as soon as it is possible for him to do so. The emphasis is on the certainty of the visit, not its immediacy. In any case, all such plans are contingent on "if the Lord is willing."

The reason for the emphasis on the certainty of his coming is expressed in the last clause: "then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have." When he returns, will they have merely talk, or will they also be able to demonstrate the power of God in their worldly wisdom?

(4:21) What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?

With one further use of the father-child illustration, Paul concludes with the threat of discipline—which the church is in no danger of exercising among themselves, as what immediately follows makes clear! "What do you prefer?" Paul asks. "Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline?"