

1 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 4 can be divided into four topics that deal with issues the church was facing in their immaturity:

I. Assessing Church Leaders - A Proper Perspective. Paul instructs them how to view him and his fellow-ministers, 1Cor 4:1-6.

II. Caution Against Pride and Self-elation. Paul writes about temptations they had to perceive too highly of themselves, and despise him and other apostles, because of the great diversity in their circumstances and condition, 1Cor 4:7-13.

III. Paul's Position as their Father in Christ. Paul challenges their regard for him in light of his relationship to the Corinth church, #1Co 4:14-16.

IV. Dealing with Problems in Person. Why Timothy was being sent and Paul's purpose in coming to them, 1Co 4:17-21.

ASSESSING CHURCH LEADERS - A PROPER PERSPECTIVE

Every now and then, we will hear about a church that is doing very well and then, all of a sudden, it is falling apart and there are people leaving faster than they came in. When we look to see what is going on, it is likely that a change in leadership happened. If one has a very popular or people-oriented leader, then he will attract people and they will be following a person with little concern of "where does God want me to be serving Him?" If church growth is based on the popularity of the pastor, then the growth is likely to stop if the pastor leaves or when the populace becomes disenchanted with the pastor.

This is a sure sign of immaturity in a church. The Church at Corinth was showing signs of immaturity with regard to alignment with various Church Leaders. They had been exposed to various leaders of the early church: Paul, Simon Peter, Apollos, and perhaps others. One leadership style may have appealed to someone more than another leadership style and that is understandable. However, it is not basis of forming factions in a local body of believers as was occurring in the Corinth Church.

Paul had addressed this issue in Chapter Three with regard to how God uses various people to accomplish different tasks in the Body of Christ. Toward the end of Chapter Three Paul concluded that all of what God was doing through various legitimate leaders belonged to all of them. "I don't want to hear any of you bragging about yourself or anyone else. Everything is already yours as a gift – Paul, Apollos, Peter, the world, life, death, the present, the future – all of it is yours, and you are privileged to be in union with Christ, who is in union with God." (1 Cor 3:21-23 - MSG)

There is a proper perspective we should have with regard to those in leadership positions in the church.

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. (4:1)

Paul is saying that leaders in the church should never be elevated to be above Christ Himself. If we put more confidence in a particular leader's teaching above what the Word of God really says, then we are (in effect) elevating that person above Jesus Christ. The leader in a church is always UNDER (servant, minister of, assistant to, or one who executes the orders of) the Master Jesus Christ. The way the church leader is to carry out the role of Christ's assistant is that he is to guide those in the church in discovering the mysteries of God. Paul describes this assignment as a TRUST.

On the other hand, such leaders are to be given proper respect since they are ministers (officers) of Christ and have been entrusted with God's plan of salvation. Matthew Henry's

Complete Commentary states it this way:

The character and dignity of their Master put an honor on them. Though they are but stewards, they are not stewards of the common things of the world, but of divine mysteries. They had a great trust, and for that reason had an honorable office. They were stewards of God's household, high-stewards in his kingdom of grace. They did not set up for masters, but they deserved respect and esteem in this honorable service.

Although Paul was addressing issues related to designated or recognized leaders in the local church, some of the ideas and conclusions regarding responsibilities can be applied to each of us. In fact each of us has been entrusted with God's Plan of Salvation. So what follows has application in my life and in your life.

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. (4:2)

Being a "trustee" is a privilege; however, **privileges** have associated **responsibilities**. If you were a trustee of an estate or executor of a will, then you are answerable or responsible to someone for the conduct of the way you carry out the assignment. In a similar way, those who are entrusted with God's Plan of Salvation are answerable for the execution of that trusteeship.

I care very little if I am judged (anacrino) by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. (4:3-4)

People try to interpret us (personally) and what we do. They will make *comparative* judgements about who is the best and will rank people they know in some sort of order. In our humanity we tend to "care" what people say or think about us and what we do. Paul was not concerned about how they or anyone else ranked him as compared to Peter or Apollos. We can define our role and communicate it to others; however, the assessment of how well we carry out that role is left up to God. His is the only opinion that really matters. Even we are not to judge (comparatively rank) our own performance. We may think that we are doing very well (compared to others we know) but that does not mean we are where we ought to be. Others tend to comparatively judge us on the basis of outward appearance and we tend to judge ourselves on the basis of "what we think others are thinking about us." On the other hand, God judges on the basis of the intent of the heart and on the basis of what He has called us to do.

In this same letter, Paul has a lot more to say about judging. In fact, he tells us that we have a responsibility to carry out value judgements. We are to be able to determine if something obviously is right or wrong. We also have to judge between alternatives as part of life. Those are different issues than doing comparative judging or ranking of one person versus someone else.

If we want to be able to judge ourselves before the "appointed time," then we must be able to distinguish between the "thought and intents of the heart." We are told in Hebrews Chapter 4 that "the Word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword and is able to separate the thoughts and intents of the heart." So when Paul wrote to this church (in 1 Cor 11:31) that they should judge (discern the thoughts and intents of) themselves (their hearts) so they would not be judged (come under judgement), he was writing about an evaluation against a standard (in this case, the Word of God) rather than comparing themselves with their neighbors.

It is very difficult to discern the thoughts and intents of our own hearts. We need to use the sharp scalpel of the sword of the Spirit on ourselves to accomplish the task. If it is difficult to discern what is in our own hearts, then it is next to impossible for us to know the thoughts and intents of the heart of someone else. This fact would lead us to agree with Paul's advice:

5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Paul is **not** writing about overt and obvious actions of various people with regard to our

needing to wait until Jesus returns in order to judge whether something is right or wrong. Paul is writing about those who appear to be one way but have hidden agendas that are not readily discernable. In such cases, we may have suspicions about their motives but have no proof. For example, some will see a preacher on television and conclude that “he’s just doing that for the money.” In fact, many people outside the church have that opinion about all churches. You might hear them say, “they just want me to come to church so they can get my money.” There may be some preachers on radio or television who are just there for the money and there may be some churches who have robust evangelism programs because they want to have the biggest church in town so the staff can have higher salaries; however, there is no way to judge that unless you have inside information. Therefore, it is sheer speculation to judge the motives of someone else and we should simply trust the Lord to sort it all out in the end.

Leaders of factions were not directly addressed but Paul used himself and Apollos as examples so as to not openly accuse local leaders of the various factions that had sprung up in the church.

6 Now, brothers, 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 take pride in one man over against another.

God’s word to us is uncluttered in its basic form. Moses told the Israelites that God spoke the words of the Ten Commandments and he added nothing more. The purpose of this simplicity is that the application of these precepts can be customized by the Holy Spirit to fit our individual situations. God may call me to a work (ministry) that is far different from the work (ministry) to which He called you.

Controversy developed in the Corinthian Church when the various factions started adopting extra-scriptural practices as conditions for fellowship. We should be very careful in our religious practice if we find we are putting too much emphasis on requiring or forbidding certain practices that the word of God does not address. If we are careful to do that, then we will be less man centered and more Christ centered.

We tend to judge everyone else by our own experience and we conclude that those who have not attained to the same level of spiritual maturity we have achieved are “baby Christians” and those who have gone beyond our level as “fanatics.” A proverb of that day is perhaps needed for our day: "Do not go beyond what is written." Any differences we can discern are a result of what God has given. This is not to say that we bear no responsibility for what He chooses to give us. He may give us conditions that are designed to correct errors in our walk. He may give us conditions that will open ministry opportunities to us where He has sovereignly decided what we should do. Regardless of the situation or circumstances, we have no place for pride and boasting.

Caution Against Pride and Self-elation

We are very complex beings. We want to be distinctive and yet another part of us wants to fit in with everyone else. We value conformity to standards and at the same time celebrate diversity! On the one hand, we have encouragements to excel and to be outstanding while experiencing peer pressure to be like our friends. When we are different, we usually experience embarrassment or pride depending on what makes us different and the way that difference is viewed by our culture. How are we to deal with the fact that personally each of us is different from other people? We can also ask that question in a broader sense of group dynamics and realize that some feature that makes us part of a group of people also sets us apart as being different. It applies to the entire gamut of life. The differences might be as simple as male versus female, white versus black, or it could be related to differences in spiritual gifts as in the case of

the Church at Corinth. Paul asked a very logic question in regard to such matters:

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 presence of pride as a prime driving force that was fueling the feud in the fellowship was clearly recognized by Paul. Notice his question, "What makes you different from anyone else?" Many times we take pride in our differences and distinctiveness. If we don't have any distinctiveness or differences, then we will invent them. Paul then made an interesting commentary on the subject. Even if differences did exist in their understanding or knowledge, then were these differences in knowledge something they developed on their own? No! Everything they knew was taught or revealed to them, they did not create any new truth and if they did not create it, on what basis were they able to brag?

There is not a whole lot in your life for which you can take credit. These words of Paul are very similar to what David said (1 Chronicles 29) when he made a very generous contribution to the construction of the temple that was to be built in Jerusalem.

14 "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

16 O LORD our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you.

When we come to grips with the absolute sovereignty of God, then that puts all the differences in proper perspective and not only does it negate pride for the perceived positive differences it also should negate embarrassment for the perceived negative differences we have.

Pride had broken out among the members and especially among the leaders of the Corinthian church. Paul got quite pointed in his rebuke of the church. He uses some very sharp irony and sarcasm in his letter to them. He does a "tongue-in-cheek" comparison of those who had claimed to be great leaders and himself and the other apostles who were really doing battle on the spiritual front line of the war between the kingdom of Light and the kingdom of Darkness.

8 Already you have all 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!

When the Children of Israel were in the Wilderness they had manna to eat and water to drink. Their clothes did not rot and their shoes did not wear out. They could have thought "we have it made" but they were in the Wilderness and NOT in the Promised Land. Christians today have become "satisfied" and think they have arrived. Some who are on the leading edge of what God is doing are suffering and dying for their faith and we really have no empathy with them. We haven't experienced those circumstances. Consequently, we don't even pray for their situation. We rest before the battle has been won. Just as the Israelites had defeated Og and Sihon and have moved into their houses while the rest of their brothers crossed over Jordan to continue the battle for the land. They thought God had "honored" them because we were born in their nation. Such thinking can infect us even today. We need to keep in mind this fact: It is not that He has honored but that He has equipped and called us to finish the job to take the gospel to all nations starting in our own Jerusalem. If we can't take the gospel to our next door neighbor, then why do we think we can fulfill the spirit of the Great Commission by giving to the Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon offerings?

In today's vernacular Paul might say something like: "You are SO great - you have arrived! You've got all the spiritual gifts and there is no improvement possible for you. You have achieved royalty and you did it without our help."

Paul then pricks their inflated ego balloon with the following: He essentially said, "That

would be great IF it really had happened that way. If you were that well off, then we would be right there along side of you enjoying all these great benefits with you.” Paul then returned to the reality of the situation when he wrote:

9 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.

Paul’s comments attest to the fact that the Christian life is not an idyllic life of ease and position and power and being honored. The Corinthian leader thought they were at the front of the line when it came to giftedness but the reality that Paul experienced was just the opposite.

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

Paul had been in the service of Jesus for several years and it had not gotten any better. He continued the contrast of the fate of the apostles with the false security and success the church at Corinth envisioned it had. They were full; he was hungry. He had experienced thirst and not having adequate clothing or housing. They were comfortable in their homes and did not know the persecution and prejudice of those who would be uncompromising in their faithfulness.

This is a rather sobering passage. When we look at ourselves in our plenty and in our comfort and in our position, do we look more like Paul or like the "baby" carnal Christians of Corinth? Does this embarrass us to do this comparison?

We sometimes think that if we observe all the commandments then we will prosper and be successful and enjoy a long life. Yet those who will live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. Our response to persecution is prescribed by the Sermon on the Mount. In Col 1:24, Paul wrote, “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.” Paul realized that the suffering he was going thru had a purpose of putting the carnal nature to death. He took up his cross daily.

Paul’s Position as their Father in Christ

14 ¶ I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. 15 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. 16 Therefore I urge you to imitate me.

The position of the Church at Corinth was such that they needed to be ashamed because of their pride and their neglect of other Christians who were suffering persecution. However, Paul was not interesting in embarrassing them. He did want them to wake up to the reality of the situation. Paul intended the comparison to be a warning to put their life in order and to get their priorities right.

The reason Paul did not want to “shame them” into making a change is that he recognized that prideful people will become “shameless” when subjected to “open shame.” In other words, people get defensive when they are criticized and they will try to rationalize their positions and thus strengthen their faulty position. Paul’s appeal was through the relationship he had with them as the “spiritual father.”

Paul offered himself as an example to follow if they needed a real life person with whom

to identify. He had been faithful to his calling. He was consistent in following the principles and value he knew to be consistent with the mind of Christ. When we do that, then we do not need to be hesitant in telling someone to follow our example.

If we are not living our life so that we feel comfortable in suggesting to someone to follow our example then we should change the way we operate until we can say with confidence "Follow me, as I follow Christ."

If most of us examine our lives, we may find that we come closer to following the Corinthians than to following the example of Paul. So Paul's warning to them is also for us. We need to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings and be made conformable to His death -- Phil 3:10. God does not leave us without an example: There will be some among us to remind us of the right way of life.

Dealing with Problems in Person

17 ¶ 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.

If the only examples you have around you are bad examples, then changes for the better are very difficult to accomplish if there is not a readily available "how to" manual. In our day, with the word of God being readily available, it is difficult for us to identify with the early church members who did not have the canon of scriptures we have. They might have had a copy of the Torah but they probably did not know the Hebrew language if they came from a Gentile background. They may have had only a letter (or just part of a letter) from Paul or Peter. A real live example of someone who was walking faithfully in the Spirit would be invaluable to someone new in the faith. Such a person (as Timothy would have been) would have been able to provide quick feedback on behaviors and practices so that bad habits and practices would not get entrenched in a church or an individual's life.

18 Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. 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. 20 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. 21 What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

Not everyone will be teachable enough to readily follow a good example. It takes humility to be able to follow the leadership of another person. So often, we think that our way is best and will not even consider adopting a better way unless there is a crisis or someone puts pressure on us to change. Paul was ready to start putting pressure on those who were so unwise as to be arrogant. The arrogant ones thought they had arrived and reached the pinnacle of spiritual maturity but this very arrogance was keeping them from becoming who they thought they were.

So many Christians have not submitted themselves to sufferings but have "stood up for their rights." This arrogance hinders the work of the cross in our lives to transform us into the image of the resurrected Christ. The lack of dying to self robs us of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We want to hold on to our earthly power and ability, not realizing that it is a hindrance to spiritual power in the Kingdom of God. Jesus told the Pharisees, "But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you." Paul said earlier that the gospel message came to them not in word only but also in power. So much of the message of the time in which we live is in word only but not in any semblance of spiritual power.

Today our concern should not be with a visit from Paul or some other minister. Our concern ought to be "what will Jesus find when He comes."