

In closing, it's worth noting that Paul felt it unnecessary to explain to the Corinthians his directive to stop passing judgment. He obviously believed they would know exactly what he was calling for and didn't think they'd be confused when, in the next section of his letter, he instructed them concerning their responsibility to judge those within the body of believers (5:12). There's no way to know whether or not his confidence in the Corinthians was well founded; what is clear is that many Christians today find themselves baffled by what seems to be Paul's inconsistent instruction.

- Undoubtedly a primary reason for the confusion is the general weakness of biblical understanding in the Church. Having been conditioned to think of the Bible as a collection of theological and practical proof-texts, multitudes of Christians have no real grasp of the *organism* of the Scripture and the way its parts work together to form a cohesive and coherent whole. This fragmentary, proof-text way of reading the Scripture is applied as well at the level of individual texts. So many Christians fail to see the unified, organic structure of this Corinthian epistle because of their narrow focus on the individual topics Paul addressed in it. Plucking verses 4:5 and 5:12 out of the epistle's larger context and argument and setting them alongside each other, it's no wonder Christians find themselves scratching their heads in confusion.

- A second reason for the difficulty is the unavoidable contribution of culture to biblical exegesis and understanding. The theological and interpretive task is never done in a vacuum, but always reflects the historical, cultural and ecclesiastical contexts in which it is situated. In the case of the American Church, it resides in a society in which passing judgment on people and things is largely frowned upon. Post-modern influences have added to this sensibility, with the result that many today believe that any sort of value judgment is wrong. Not only is *meaning* often treated as a personal, wholly subjective matter, the same treatment is given to the categories of *truth* and *error* and *right* and *wrong*. In such a culture, making judgments is regarded as foolish and wrong at best and arguably even evil.

So also the Church itself is not untouched by the culture in which it finds itself. This is a matter of divine design as much as inevitability: God intends and requires Church-culture interaction, for the accomplishing of their Abrahamic calling requires that Christians engage and "leaven" their communities and cultures. However, most often the "leavening" goes in the wrong direction: Rather than bearing Christ's fragrance – the truth of new creation – in the surrounding culture, Christians often import their culture's sensibilities into the Church (even if unwittingly in the name of outreach, relevance, contextualization, etc.).

On the other side, and often as a reaction to the Church's compromises, some Christian communities regard secular culture as corrupt and corrupting and so denounce its various features and tenets. In a culture like America where political correctness and refusal to pass judgment are widely treated as virtues, many churches react against the culture's "wishy-washiness" by taking hard and fast positions on virtually every issue (a posture eminently suited to the natural mind).

For these reasons and others as well, Christians often find themselves struggling to understand and apply their responsibility to “judge with righteous judgment.” Paul’s apparent self-contradiction in this epistle only adds to the conundrum. Thus it’s worthwhile to draw some summary conclusions regarding Paul’s present instruction, especially toward the goal of laying a solid foundation for what is to come in the subsequent context (and the balance of the epistle).

Once again, it’s crucial to keep Paul’s directive in context. Some want to lay it alongside Matthew 7:1 (and perhaps other verses) and read it as a generic prohibition intended as a comprehensive Christian ethic: *Don’t judge anyone or anything at any time or under any circumstances*. Such a reading is ridiculous on its face and makes it impossible to rightly understand either the present passage or the broader scriptural instruction regarding the matter of judging. This reading becomes even more absurd when judging is understood in terms of reaching conclusions and having beliefs and convictions.

In context, Paul issued his prohibition in relation to the problem of factions in the Corinthian church. By aligning themselves with certain leaders (“I am of Paul; I am of Apollos; I am of Cephas), they were boasting in one individual over against the others (3:21). In this way they were passing judgment on them all, binding themselves to one so as to discount, marginalize or even disparage the others.

Moreover, Paul was implicitly indicting the Corinthians of passing judgment on Jesus Himself, for the Church’s leaders are His servants, raised up by Him as stewards of His gospel. By aligning themselves with one servant over against the others, the Corinthians were effectively calling into question the Lord’s judgment and usurping His authority as judge. They were applying their own criteria to the men Jesus gave to His Church as ministers, assuming the right and ability to rank them according to their own standards of performance and worthiness. Jesus made no such distinction, but rather regarded each man as distinctly but equally fitted to his own appointed labors in the Church (3:5-9).

The above considerations are fairly obvious, but what is often missed – especially by those who ignore or minimize the larger context – is the fact that Paul was dealing with the overarching problem of *natural-mindedness* at Corinth. The Corinthian factions showed them to be guilty of judging their leaders and Christ Himself, but all of this was the result of their “fleshliness” – of their failure to employ the mind of the Spirit (3:1-4).

Viewed carefully in context, it’s obvious that Paul wasn’t telling the Corinthians that they were never to pass any sort of judgment on any person or thing, much less that they were to renounce any and all personal convictions. ***What he was calling for was an end to the kind of judging that is inherent in the natural mind and its operations.***

Again, and importantly, the natural mind is preeminently a *judging* mind: It operates from within the fundamental perceptual premise of “me” in contradistinction to “not me.” Everything that is *not me* is appraised and interacted with on the basis of how it *appears to me* to stand *in relation to me*. For the natural mind, self – or more precisely, one’s sense of oneself – is the datum and standard relative to which all things are measured.

Also crucial to understanding Paul's instruction is recognizing that the natural mind is *self-deceiving*. As it pertains to this context, the natural mind deceives itself regarding its ability and authority to scrutinize others and pass judgment on them. *And implicit in this sense of personal prerogative is the natural human confidence of capability to look beyond appearances to the hidden realities behind them.* The natural mind judges in a way that betrays its arrogant presumption that it has access to the things that are hidden; that it is able to look into men's hearts. So it was with the Corinthians (4:5b), many of whom were eager to charge Paul with all sorts of questionable motives and intentions in his labors among them (ref. esp. 1 Corinthians 9:1-23; 2 Corinthians 1-4, 10-13).

The natural mind judges from within itself on the basis of itself (its perceptions and convictions). This is why, in aligning themselves with one of Christ's servants over against the others, the Corinthians were making His servant-stewards *their* servants and stewards, not of the truth as it is in Christ, but of *their notions* of that truth. They usurped Jesus' authority by binding His servants and their message to themselves, but also by taking His sole prerogative to "*bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of the heart.*" They judged and set one servant over against another on the basis of a self-deluded confidence in their capacity to perceive and know.

But precisely because the natural mind is given to self-deception, its powers of judgment are untrustworthy while appearing to be rock solid and completely reliable. Self-deluded yet self-trusting, naturally-minded men set themselves in the place of Christ, affording to themselves insight and prerogatives that don't belong to them. They assign themselves the role of judge, but their failure to acknowledge the difference between their perceptions and notions and truth as it *actually* is ensures that they are unrighteous judges who subject all things to themselves and so ultimately obscure and lie against the truth.

This is the framework for understanding Paul's demand that Christ's people not pass judgment on one another. It is also the grid through which his subsequent statement (5:12) and all of his instruction in the epistle (and elsewhere) must be viewed.

And what emerges first of all (and what ought to be obvious even apart from these considerations) is that Paul wasn't calling for Christians to abstain from all judgment – as if that were even possible. There is a critical difference between *making judgments* and *passing judgment* in the sense in which Paul was speaking.

It's impossible for a human being not to make judgments; all of life involves interfacing and interacting with the surrounding world through a process of perception, assessment, conclusion and action. And this applies to what a person *believes* as much as to what he does. Everyone reaches conclusions respecting everything he encounters in life, whether experientially or intellectually. Therefore, if one conceives of "judging" in terms of reaching conclusions and forming beliefs and personal convictions, then Paul's instruction becomes utterly nonsensical. But Paul wasn't calling for a vacuous mind devoid of conviction. *At the same time, the Christian's personal beliefs and convictions are directly and profoundly implicated in what he was demanding.*

The relationship between one's beliefs and convictions and the obligation to not judge implicates *epistemology*. That is, it involves recognizing the distinction between one's knowledge of a thing and the thing itself, as well as between what a person knows and how he knows what he knows. Ultimately it involves recognizing the crucial distinction between personal perception and conviction and actual truth.

- First of all, *the fact that someone sincerely believes something to be true doesn't make it so*. So Paul could affirm that his conviction of personal blamelessness did not acquit him (4:4), though he held it with a good conscience as the result of honest and diligent self-examination. Paul was able to scrutinize himself at a level impossible for any other human being (2:11), and yet he was unable to judge himself fully and flawlessly. However sincerely, carefully and thoroughly he sought the truth concerning himself, his self-judgment inevitably fell short.
- *And even where one's convictions and actual truth coincide, they never do so perfectly*; there is always some disparity between truth as it really is and as it is discerned. So "saving faith" implies that a person's beliefs about Christ coincide with the truth that is bound up in Him. *And yet there remains a subjective quality to faith – as a matter of individuality, ignorance and immaturity*. In this way, one Christian's "faith" is not the same as another's, and each is to hold and honor his own faith as his "own conviction before God." Indeed, a Christian **cannot** yield his faith to the faith of another without committing sin, *and yet this is precisely what the one passing judgment insists upon*. He is demanding that the brother he's judging submit his own faith and conscience to him (ref. Romans 14:1-23).

Paul understood, practiced and preached what escapes multitudes of Christians, including many of the believers at Corinth. He recognized that even the most mature among Christ's saints knows only "in part" (1 Corinthians 13:9) and that every believer's transformation into Christ's perfect humanity is always incomplete on this side of the grave (2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:10ff). As a result, the one who thinks he knows – thinks he has arrived at truth free of deficiency, admixture and error – has, by that alone, roundly refuted his own claim (1 Corinthians 8:2). *Few Christians would consciously claim such knowledge, but many operate as if they had absolutely no doubt of it.*

Whether their leaders or their fellow believers, Christians are all too ready to bind their brethren to their own faith and conscience. To pass judgment in this way is to commit sin; how, then, do believers exercise their obligation to examine and test all things? In terms of this context, how do they identify Christ's faithful shepherds while avoiding factional distinctions and alignments? Paul provided the way forward: *Christ's true ministers are His servants and stewards of the mysteries disclosed and fulfilled in Him:*

Jesus' shepherds are men of constancy and integrity who aren't self-seeking, but labor to see Christ's *life* (not mere knowledge or conduct) perfected in His own. They are diligent to "rightly divide the word of truth" – not as men who have bound up all truth, rid themselves of all error and secured every saint's full agreement, but as those who are faithful to discern and uphold the *gospel* of Jesus Christ as revealed in all the Scripture.