

- d. Paul understood that the Corinthians' factions were not about promoting the men they were rallying around, but about promoting themselves. To the question of who was distinguishing them, they were compelled to answer that they were distinguishing themselves. By posturing on behalf of one against the other the Corinthians were setting themselves apart from and over one another. Making distinctions among Christ's servant-stewards meant making distinctions among themselves, with the ultimate outcome being that each one was distinguishing himself from his brethren – setting himself apart as superior.

There *were* actual distinctions among the body at Corinth and those who led them, but distinctions designed and put in place by God. Each individual believer was unique, but because each received his own unique endowment from God Himself. The answer the Corinthians should have given to Paul's first question is that God was the One who distinguished them. Their personal distinction was indeed a cause for boasting, but boasting in God.

The natural mind always confuses and inverts the truth, and so it was with the Corinthians' notions respecting their own personal significance and that of others around them. The mere *fact* of their factions showed that they didn't rightly regard distinctions within Christ's body, but it was all the more evident in the way they *devised* their factions. Stated differently, their fleshliness was evident in the fact that they divided Christ's body into factions, but even more so in the criteria they applied in making those divisions and ranking the men associated with them. The Corinthians' factions showed what they believed about notability and greatness, but their perspective and criteria of judgment were antithetical to God's. Their fleshly "wisdom" led them to assess greatness a certain way; in His wisdom, God saw things very differently.

The antithesis between divine and natural wisdom has its focal point in "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" – that is, in the antithesis between the truth of the "Christ event" as the revelation and accomplishment of God's wisdom and how men perceive, interpret and respond to it. This antithesis is at the heart of Paul's instruction in the larger context (1:18-2:16, 3:18-23) and is the central premise behind his sarcastic reprimand.

This is evident in the fact that Paul's reprimand itself consists of a series of antitheses, each of which corresponds to the primary antithesis of spiritual and natural wisdom, *but in ironical fashion*: From their vantage point of fleshly wisdom, the Corinthians viewed Paul and his fellow apostles as foolish and weak derelicts, while regarding themselves as prudent, strong and distinguished. Had they applied spiritual wisdom they would have reached the opposite conclusion. And while Paul's contrasts pertain first and foremost to the inner operations of a person's mind (the "wisdom" his mind employs), inward reasoning inevitably finds expression in *outward* disposition and conduct. So it was with the Corinthians and their resultant divisions and factions; so it is with the spiritually-minded man and his conduct and the response it receives (4:9-13).

Three further things about Paul's reprimand ought to be mentioned:

- The first is that Paul's series of antitheses pertains directly to two groups of individuals: Paul and Christ's apostolic servants and the Corinthians.
- Second, Paul's hyperbolic language highlights the fact that the natural mind operates with a flawed perspective and sense of perception: It has an exaggerated (caricatured) sense of self as well as others: *positively in the case of self; negatively in the case of others*. Thus Paul's language underscores the antithesis between the natural and spiritual mind; they inhabit two very different "worlds" in terms of perception and judgment.
- The third issue was alluded to above, which is that Paul's contrasts are not mere hyperbole for the sake of making a point. They express the truth that *very different life experiences* attend those who operate with the mind of the flesh as opposed to the mind of the spirit.

From his three questions Paul moved immediately to a three-fold rhetorical pronouncement: "*You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us.*" Paul's use of asyndeton (a literary device whereby clauses are strung together without conjunctions for the sake of emphasis) shows that he intended these three statements to function as a unit in order to reinforce the same fundamental point. Paul was, as it were, hitting the Corinthians with a series of quick, sharp jabs that worked together to effect a decisive knock-out.

And Paul was hitting them with what their disposition and divisions implied: their proud confidence that they were *full* – that they lacked nothing and were fully satiated in terms of *spiritual resource* in insight, maturity, gifts and wisdom ("you have become rich") and the *power and authority of judgment* such resources convey ("you have become kings"). It's important to recognize Paul's statements as ironic and sarcastic: He was deriding the Corinthians for their self-important delusions, not affirming them. He was using what they implicitly believed about themselves in order to expose the truth that their self-judgment – as their judgment of him and others of Christ's apostolic servants – was the perverse product of a natural mind. However much the Corinthians may have bristled at his words and felt misrepresented by them, their factions (as the other issues Paul would deal with in his letter) proved him right.

The Corinthians' attitude and conduct betrayed their sense of superiority – a superiority not shared by Paul and the other apostles: They had become rich rulers "*without them.*" This phrase contributes to Paul's meaning in a couple of ways:

- First, it reflects what is implied in the very notion of superiority: The one who is superior possesses something which others lack. Whether by exalting one man or depreciating the others, the Corinthians betrayed their hubris that Christ's servants were subject to them and their judgment.

- Second, the phrase highlighted the crucial distinction Paul saw between himself and the Corinthians : Full of themselves, they had set him aside as unseemly and irrelevant; for his part, Paul wanted them to know that he neither claimed nor desired any share in their “fullness.” The spiritual mind sees through the ignorance and folly of fleshly thinking.

Paul’s assessment of the Corinthians was antithetical to theirs; he flatly disagreed with their self-appraisal, the fundamental reason being that he had an entirely different conception of fullness, riches and authority. Consciously or otherwise, the Corinthians ascribed to themselves grounds for self-boasting; Paul looked at them and saw grounds only for rebuke and repentance. Thus his sarcastic remark: *“I would indeed that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.”*

Some scholars believe that Paul was drawing upon conventional philosophical notions in order to make the Corinthians see that their supposed “wisdom” was essentially no different from that promoted by the esteemed pagan philosophers of their day. For example, the Stoics believed and taught that the attainment of wisdom (self-mastery) enabled the disciple to transcend natural entanglements; in this way the “wise” attained true satisfaction (“fullness”) and mastery (“rule”) over all things. Whether or not this was Paul’s intention, the Corinthians almost certainly would have made the connection themselves. Either way, they couldn’t miss his meaning: Their convictions were merely the musings of fleshly, unspiritual minds. Paul didn’t regard the Corinthians the way they regarded themselves, as men of mastery and power. But neither did he measure himself according to their notions of greatness. *Paul understood that sharing in Christ means reigning as kings, but, until the last day, sharing in Him means sharing in His reproach, suffering and death* (cf. 2 Timothy 2:12; 2 Corinthians 4:1-12).

The balance of Paul’s reprimand opens up his three-fold pronouncement by means of a series of paired contrasts directed alternately at the Corinthians and Christ’s apostles (4:9-13). And again, the contextual framework for those various contrasts is the radically different “grid” and sensibilities provided by the natural and spiritual mind. (Paul used the apostles in his comparison for at least two reasons: First, they epitomized the *wisdom* and *life example* which is antithetical to the natural counterparts embraced and promoted by the Corinthians; second, the apostles epitomized the *witness role* to which God calls His servants.)

The fleshly Corinthians conceived of distinction and greatness in terms of natural human categories – things such as status, prominence, power, accomplishment and recognition. (The fleshly-mind can equally find greatness in moral and ethical virtue, philanthropy and self-sacrifice.) And so, recognizing the unique distinction of Christ’s apostles as the foundation of His Church and the stewards of His gospel and authority (cf. Acts 1:1-8, 2:42-43; Ephesians 2:11-22; Revelation 21:14), they *naturally* assessed a man’s apostolic claim on the basis of that person’s conformity to their notions of greatness. This is precisely why Paul appeared to many of them to be an inferior apostle, if not an outright imposter.

Appraised through their natural grid, Paul (and those apostolic figures who followed in his steps) was a painful embarrassment. By his own account, Paul was a man beset by weakness and physical and material lack, a man without distinction and personal resources – indeed a virtual beggar, easily ignored, brushed aside or crushed under the feet of men. He was an unimpressive and infirmed figure who seemed to also possess a weak inner constitution: a man who wouldn't even stand up for himself when reviled, slandered or persecuted.

Great men – and surely greatness characterizes Christ's chosen apostles – are men of power, authority, significance and esteem; men of notable distinction and reputation who are acknowledged and served by others and who exercise their prerogative as commanding figures. Is it any wonder that, to the natural mind – even when it operates within Christians, men like Paul are regarded as “*the scum of the world*” (refuse or uncleanness to be purged and disposed of) and “*the dregs of all things*” (that which is scraped away, such as the dirt from one's shoes)?

Many among the Corinthians didn't regard men like Paul and the lives they lived as in any way indicative of greatness, and Paul himself knew better than anyone how much his life deviated from natural human conceptions of distinction and renown. He had no delusions about the difficult and ignominious life he was living in the service of Christ. The Lord had told him at the outset what he was appointed for (Acts 9:1-16), and the ensuing years had given Paul more insight and clarity regarding the “glory” bound up in the apostolic calling: Jesus' apostles were, in many ways, the least distinguished among His saints; as stewards of His gospel and examples to His people, the apostles were preeminently men put on humiliating display before the whole creation as those “*condemned to death*” (4:9; cf. 2 Corinthians 1-4, 11). Richard Hays' comments are illuminating:

*“Paul offers the image of himself and the other apostles as prisoners sentenced to death. The image is taken from the well-known practice of the Roman ‘triumph,’ in which the victorious general would parade through the streets in a chariot, with the leaders of the defeated army trailing along in the rear of the procession, to be ‘exhibited’ and humiliated as a public ‘spectacle’ on their way to imprisonment or execution... It is a stunning image, not least because Paul suggests that it is **God** who has won the victory and made a spectacle of the apostolic prisoners. The Corinthians, by contrast, fancy themselves as leaders of the procession, victorious kings who therefore, Paul suggests, are **not** subject to the authority of God.”* (emphasis in original)

Paul employed this same imagery in his second Corinthian letter, and there he provides crucial insight into why God orchestrates His victory procession with His servants exhibited as a public spectacle of humiliation and ignominy: *It is in order that they should bear **Christ's** fragrance before the world – the fragrance that directs men toward Him* (2:14). God intends for His servants to bear witness to His Son and the gospel of His triumph; if He were to display them to the world in any other fashion He would have them bearing witness to *themselves*.

The critical point is that the watching world witnesses God's gospel of His victory in Christ primarily through the *living witness* of his heralds, not what they say. And Christ's victory came through the weakness and "foolishness" of His humble, obedient self-offering (1:23; cf. Philippians 2:5-8; also 1 Peter 2:18-23). Ironically, defeat, debasement and death are at the heart of God's absolute triumph; *to employ Paul's imagery, in the first instance God's victory parade before the world had Him leading in His triumph His own Son – humiliated, crushed and led to His death.* Paul recognized that he and the other apostles were charged with testifying to "*Jesus Christ and Him crucified*" (2:2), which meant testifying to God's triumph through weakness, humiliation and death. The gospel sets forth the truth that God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong, and the base and despised things of the world to nullify the things the world greatly esteems (1:27-28).

*How, then, can those who are Christ's servants and stewards of His gospel adorn themselves with the world's trappings – its wisdom, strength, and values – and expect that they will bear Christ's fragrance and so lead men to Him?*

Approached from a different vantage point, the gospel heralds the "good news" that God has triumphed to usher in His kingdom of the new creation. This kingdom doesn't have its essence or genesis in this world and its notions of power and dominion (John 18:36; cf. Luke 22:24-30); it reflects and operates according to God's wisdom in Christ, which appears as foolishness to human "wisdom" (1:20-25, 2:6-9). God's servants are charged with heralding *this* kingdom, and this amounts to proclaiming the truth of new creation. But this renewal exists only in those who share in Christ's life by His Spirit. This means that Christians' proclamation to men of the gospel of the kingdom is their testimony to the truth of new creation *as it is embodied in their own persons and the community of believers.* And their embodiment of new creation is precisely the life of Christ in them, for He is the essence and first fruits of new creation. Thus Christ's witnesses testify to the gospel of new creation by manifesting in their own persons *His* life; they proclaim His gospel by bearing His fragrance. And they bear His fragrance by manifesting to the world the *truth* of Jesus Christ – that which the world regards as weakness, foolishness and worthlessness, namely His ignominy, reproach, suffering and death (2 Corinthians 4). Any other witness is witness to self; *it is anti-Christ* (ref. 11:12-15 within 2 Corinthians 10-12).

In this way Paul's rebuke pierced to the heart of the Corinthian factions: The issue wasn't selfish squabbling or even arrogance; *it was the truth of the gospel and its testimony that were at stake.* The Corinthian factions betrayed the mind which appraises God's servants according to natural values and considerations. This was why Paul was maligned and marginalized in favor of "eminent apostles" – men who bore the marks of natural "greatness" in contrast to the counter-intuitive, foolish and weak greatness of the self-giving, dying Jesus. The Corinthians imagined themselves standing with such eminent men at the head of God's triumphal procession, but the Lord they professed to serve and bear witness to had, like Paul, been exhibited at the rear, a man condemned to die.