

16. Paul's sharp reprimand is the climax of his treatment of the Corinthian factions. By it he showed how radically the natural mind is set in antithesis to the way things really are – to the truth as God knows it to be. Paul made his point by contrasting his own “greatness” with the Corinthians’ standard of apostolic eminence. By their measure, Paul and those like him were found severely wanting; indeed the Corinthians were compelled to question Paul’s very claim to apostleship. Their minds had no avenue to reconcile apostolic eminence and authority and men who were, in earthly terms, the “scum of the world.”

The Corinthians grossly misjudged Christ’s apostles, and their misjudgment was fundamental to their divisions and factions. They were rallying around men who best satisfied their personal criteria of greatness, and their posturing was seriously undermining the life, unity and integrity of the body of Christ in Corinth. But for all that, there was an even greater evil in their thinking and conduct: Whether or not they recognized it, the Corinthian zeal for “God and truth” was making true witness to Christ and His gospel impossible; quite the opposite, they were proclaiming a false, anti-Christ gospel among themselves and to the watching world. Their natural-mindedness left them bearing their own fragrance rather than Christ’s.

Paul revealed to the Corinthians that they were guilty of offenses beyond what they could have imagined and which must have shocked them to consider. They believed they were promoting a high view of God’s Church by rallying around its most eminent leaders; what they were really doing was defiling and working toward the ruination of His holy sanctuary (3:16-23). So also they believed they were honoring Christ’s gospel and its mission by exalting those apostolic witnesses who appeared to be its most notable, gifted and powerful emissaries; instead, they were denigrating Christ and His gospel and directing men away from Him by bearing false witness to the world (1:17-2:5).

- a. Given the gravity of the issues and their implications for the Church and its witness, Paul’s use of blunt and sarcastic language with the Corinthians was entirely appropriate. He knew that a gentler and more subtle approach would likely be lost upon them; they needed to understand the seriousness of this situation and how seriously Paul himself was taking it. He was determined to strip the veil from their hubris and self-delusions and drop them to their knees, but not for the sake of shaming them. No doubt his words provoked shame in at least some of his readers, but Paul actually had a different motivation and goal. Shaming the Corinthians may have made a point and achieved an effect, but only as a hollow victory; Paul’s reprimand was a ministration of love. What he sought was godly conviction and repentance befitting the saints of God and the leading of the mind of Christ. Paul’s intention was *admonition* (4:14a): instruction that corrects and redirects rather than merely inform and prick the conscience.
- b. Paul’s reprimand was the faithfulness of a devoted *father* (4:14b-15). He wasn’t interested in merely unmasking the Corinthians’ foolishness and sin or even in vindicating his apostleship; he was chastening them as his beloved children. Following his heavenly Father’s pattern of love and nurture, Paul’s goal for the Corinthians was liberation and restoration from captivity to the flesh and its fruit.

God was the Corinthians' true Father, but Paul was their father "*in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*" He'd, as it were, begotten them as children for God through the ministration of the gospel of power (cf. 1:18 with Romans 1:16-17). The Corinthians would have many pedagogues over time (note Paul's rhetorical *ten thousand*), but all pedagogues serve the same function: They care for and train up children who have but *one* father, and Paul was that man (cf. Philippians 2:19-22; 1 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4). Many servants of Christ had and would instruct and lead the Corinthians, but it remained that they had only one spiritual father.

c. In the very nature of the case, children share in the substance and likeness of their father. There is, therefore, an intrinsic integrity – a rightness or *righteousness* – when children manifest in themselves the likeness of their father. So it was that Paul, the spiritual father of the saints at Corinth, could exhort them to be *imitators* of him (4:16). *Viewed within the larger context, Paul was calling the Corinthians to perceive, judge and act as he did, through the mind of Christ.*

- Their natural-mindedness amounted to a contrariness on their part; they were at odds with their father Paul, whose thinking and judgment accorded with the wisdom given him by the Spirit's leading (2:6-13).
- Imitating Paul, then, meant renouncing their fleshliness and embracing the wisdom in which he walked. This wisdom allowed him to appraise greatness the way his Father does: as "*bearing in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus should be manifested in our mortal flesh.*" Imitating Paul meant (and means) recognizing and living out the truth that greatness is Christ-likeness attained through personal deconstruction and reconstruction by the Spirit, not the perfecting of the edifice of self in accordance with human standards (2 Corinthians 4:6ff; cf. Philippians 3).
- If the Corinthians became imitators of their spiritual father's wisdom and understanding, their attitudes and manner of life would also be brought in line with the mind of Christ. They'd recognize their stupid arrogance and see the folly and evil of boasting in men; they'd discern the true, counter-intuitive greatness bound up in Christ and Him crucified and so naturally order their lives and witness accordingly. *They'd willingly join Paul at the end of God's victory procession as men condemned to die.*

The obvious implication of these considerations – one made clear by Paul in his instruction elsewhere – is that he was calling the Corinthians to imitate him *as he imitated Christ*. Which is to say, Paul was calling upon the Corinthians to live out Christ's life and mind in them just as he was. They, too, were sharers in Christ by His indwelling and renewing Spirit, and so imitating Paul meant following after him as a man yielded to the life of Christ in him. It wasn't clones or mimics of the man Saul of Tarsus that Paul sought, but saints of God living into the truth as it is in Christ: mature children who would follow upon his faith and love and the self-giving humility of true wisdom (cf. 11:1; Ephesians 5:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:6).

- d. Paul was deeply troubled about the Corinthian church. His strained relationship with them was certainly a central concern for him, but Paul recognized that that particular issue, as all the problems at Corinth, was symptomatic of their fleshliness. The core malaise wasn't bad conduct or dysfunctional relationships, but flawed judgment; the Corinthians were reasoning and functioning as "mere men" (3:1-4). And so, with an eye to healing his relationship with them, but out of ultimate concern for the larger issue, Paul informed the Corinthians that he was sending to them his young associate Timothy (4:17).

Most likely this refers to the same episode Luke noted in Acts 19:21-22. Paul penned this Corinthian letter from Ephesus during his three-year ministry there, and Luke recorded that Paul sent Timothy and Erastus back into Macedonia during the latter part of his time at Ephesus. Nothing more is said about the two men's travels in Macedonia, except that Timothy was with Paul when he later departed Greece and headed north toward his eventual goal of returning to Jerusalem with the churches' offering to the saints there (20:1-4).

Some scholars believe Timothy carried the first Corinthian epistle with him, although 16:10 clearly makes that view problematic. (Paul's wording here also seems inconsistent with 16:10 – "if Timothy comes" versus "I have sent Timothy," but this discrepancy can be resolved in various ways.) Whatever the relative timing of the arrival of Timothy and Paul's letter, Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand why Timothy had come to them; Paul had sent him as his representative to "*remind them of his ways which are in Christ.*"

Paul didn't clarify what he meant by "his ways in Christ," but the statement itself and the context reveal his general meaning. First, his "ways" were the subject of his instruction in all the churches, leading to two further insights: Whatever these "ways" were, they could be communicated through verbal instruction. Second, Paul regarded them as of first importance since he made them a component of his instruction in every church body. Some hold that Paul was referring to instruction in Christian morality, but the context argues for a broader understanding.

- To a significant extent the Corinthian church was estranged from Paul. Some regarded him as, at best, an inferior and insignificant apostle; others questioned his apostolic status altogether. And questioning the credibility and even the legitimacy of his apostleship, it was a short leap for the Corinthians to start questioning his integrity and motives.
- The Corinthians were at odds with Paul, but because they were viewing him with natural minds. His person, life and circumstance didn't coincide with their notions of eminence, and that discontinuity left them judging, not their own criteria and conclusions, but Paul himself and his apostolic calling and faithfulness. The Corinthians had formed and nurtured an impression of Paul in his absence, and over time that impression supplanted the *truth* that was Paul (4:9ff; 2 Corinthians 10-12).

In their minds (and no doubt reinforced by their interaction with each other), the Corinthians had made Paul into someone he was not, and Paul was wise enough to know that the only way to shatter their false image was for him to reintroduce himself to them and reestablish the truth of who he was. Short of him coming in person, the next best thing was to send someone to Corinth who could accurately represent him to them – not only by speaking of him correctly, *but by modeling Paul himself*. This is precisely what Paul had in mind, evident in his language of father and son. Like all sons, Timothy was *of* his father and bore an *essential likeness* to his father. Such was Paul’s confidence in this young man: He believed that the Corinthians would be reminded of the truth of his person and ways by hearing and observing his “faithful child in the Lord.” Like Timothy, the saints at Corinth had a righteous obligation to show themselves faithful children of their spiritual father (and therefore of their heavenly Father), but that could not happen until they were reacquainted with the true Paul and his life in Christ Jesus.

- e. Paul completed his treatment of the Corinthian factions and transitioned into his next subject by means of a final warning (4:18-21). He was sending Timothy to Corinth, but with the promise that he himself would follow shortly. Moreover, he was coming as a devoted father fully committed to their correction; whether by letter or in person, Paul’s mind and ministry to them were the same. Their factions highlighted the spirit of arrogance among them, and if they did not deal with it by the time he arrived he most certainly would, and would do so decisively.

Paul previously identified this arrogance as the underlying issue in the Corinthians aligning themselves with one man against others (4:6). That same sense is clearly in view here, but now more specifically in relation to Paul himself. Corinth had its “Paul group” (1:12-17), but that meant that the church also had many others who were aligned *against* Paul. But as far as he was concerned, it made no difference (3:4ff): Whether disposed toward him or against him on behalf of others, Paul recognized that all such “boasting in men” is a matter of arrogance, and he wasn’t about to put up with it; he was going to confront their arrogant presumption of power with that which is power indeed.

Many at Corinth were “puffed up” – men who were full of themselves and all too happy to divide and hurt Christ’s body for the sake of their self-assured notions and beliefs. They had made their judgment synonymous with truth, and therefore their convictions synonymous with righteousness. At Corinth (as in every church), natural minds were striving to supplant Christ as Lord, and Paul was committed to vanquishing them. For, though the natural mind ascribes power to itself, it is actually powerless: Its only resource is *words*, and its “power” consists in its ability to use words to deceive the naïve and foolish. Words have no power – *truth* does, and the reason is that the *Spirit of truth* stands behind the truth and empowers it. Thus natural wisdom is empty and impotent; its only power is the power of deception. But spiritual wisdom has power because it reflects the mind of Christ: the truth of God that is His wisdom and power in Jesus. Paul was coming to Corinth and he’d confront their arrogance in the effectual power of God’s gospel; he desired to do so in gentleness, but, for Christ’s sake, he was fully prepared to bring a rod.