

1 CORINTHIANS 4

Differences Between Paul & The Corinthians

INTRO: “So then let no one boast in men,” (3.21). Strife and division had entered the Corinthian church, no doubt because some of their own members had sought to create a following, appealing to worldly wisdom and human logic. What they needed to follow was the wisdom of God, His mind that He delivered to Paul and other inspired teachers (2.6-13). Such wisdom would truly build-up God’s temple (3.10-17). But would they listen? Chapter 4 continues Paul’s appeal that they forsake the wisdom of this world, and that they listen to what he has to say.

Implied in this is some tension between Paul and at least one faction in Corinth. It’s doubtful that many of the members had hard feelings toward Paul, but it would seem evident that some of their teachers had many negative things to say about the apostle. Thus, Paul’s appeal contains a defense of his own behavior, reminding them of his care so that they might again heed what he has to say.

VSS. 1-5, REGARD US AS SERVANTS & STEWARDS

1. Paul had urged them that “no one boast in men.” Paul wanted them to listen to him, but not so they could boast in him. Paul was but a servant of the master.
2. Paul’s use of the word “steward” is of interest. “Unless he was to be a slave to his slaves, a rich landowner had to find someone to do the routine work of running the estate. This deputy was called an *oikonomos* (cf. Luke 16:1). He held a responsible position; he was set over others and directed the day-to-day affairs. But he was subject to a master and was often a slave. Then in relation to the master he was a slave, but in relation to the slaves he was the master.” (Leon Morris in the Tyndale commentary) Thus, while Paul was a servant and

steward of Christ, the Corinthians should pay attention to him because the Master had entrusted the gospel to Paul and others like him.

3. The most important trait of a steward is faithfulness (vs. 2). Paul had been faithful to his Master, so much that he was “conscious of nothing against myself,” (vs. 4). However, Paul uses this fact to make a different point: it doesn’t matter what the Corinthians thought of him and his work. It didn’t matter what Paul thought of his own work. All that mattered is what the Lord thought of His servant!
4. Thus, the Corinthians shouldn’t be so quick to pass judgement on Paul and his labors. A day would come when the Lord would judge and reward His faithful servants (vs. 5)
 - » Must be careful that we don’t misuse Paul’s words in this verse. He is not saying that the actions and words of others, including teachers, should not be “judged”. In chapter 5 he will rebuke the church for not “judging” a sinner in their midst. Furthermore, Paul would later instruct Timothy that elders guilty of sin should be publicly rebuked (1Tim. 5.19-20).
 - » But Paul’s work was clearly approved by God. Their judging him was more about personal pride and envy on behalf of their “wise” teachers. Paul would not compromise his message to please them because doing so would mean unfaithfulness to his Master. And they should quit judging him, knowing that the Lord would do so.

VSS. 6-7, A CALL TO NOT EXCEED WHAT IS WRITTEN

1. Paul had been using himself and Apollos as examples (note 3.5-6, 22; 4.1). But it was not Paul and Apollos that needed the lesson, it was the Corinthian saints! The lesson? “To not

exceed what is written”.

2. The word “exceed” in the NASB is translated “go beyond” in the ESV and NIV versions. Louw Nida defines it as “an idiom, literally ‘not above what is written’, to act sensibly in not violating written rules and traditions—‘to act sensibly in keeping with rules, to observe rules properly.’”
3. Given that “what is written” typically references the Old Testament Scriptures, it seems likely that Paul is referring to the passages he has already quoted. Each passage dealt with wisdom and its relationship to the Lord. Paul’s point was that the Scriptures warned against reliance on human wisdom and its ensuing pride, so they should not go beyond what the Scriptures taught!
 - » Isaiah 29.14 quoted in 1.19.
 - » Jeremiah 9.22-23 quoted in 1.31.
 - » Isaiah 64.4 quoted in 2.9.
 - » Job 5.13 quoted in 3.19.
 - » Psalm 94.11 quoted in 3.20.
4. Note: while the statement “you may learn not to exceed what is written” had a specific context in Paul’s letter, that it is a general principle for all Christians is beyond doubt (see 2John 9). Any time we stray beyond the Scriptures, we stray into danger.
5. Their exceeding the Scriptures led them to arrogance and boasting (vs. 6), but had they forgotten that what they had, they had received? (vs. 7)

VSS. 8-13, THEIR ATTITUDE CONTRASTED WITH PAUL’S

1. They thought of themselves as self-sufficient (vs. 8). They had the same mindset that would later be rebuked in the church at Laodicea (see Rev. 3.17). One of the stoic catch phrases, as taught by Diogenes, was “I alone am rich, I alone reign as king.”
2. Contrast their self-sufficiency with the tribulation of the apostles (vss. 9-13). “Probably the imagery was drawn from the triumphal processions of returning Roman legions. The senior military people would come first, then the

more junior ones. Behind them, the prisoners would be dragged along, in descending order of rank. Among the defeated foes, the lowest classes and the slaves would bring up the rear, eating everyone else’s dust, knowing that they were destined for the arena. There they would die at the hands of gladiators or would simply be thrown to the wild beasts for the amusement of the populace. In fact, Paul says, since the stage on which the struggles of the church are being played out takes in the spiritual arena every bit as much as the physical, the apostles “have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men” (4:9b).” (D.A. Carson)

3. With dripping irony, Paul sought to awaken the Corinthians to the reality of what being Christ’s servant meant. They were full and satisfied, but servants of Christ give up all things to do His will. They had become arrogant against each other and even against Paul, when Paul and the other apostles had suffered the loss of all things for their sakes.

VSS. 14-21, PAUL APPEALS TO THEM AS A FATHER

1. Paul’s language had been harsh, but he was not using such in anger, but out of love for them. After all, since he had been the one to first bring the gospel to them, he was in a sense their spiritual father.
2. Paul makes a contrast between himself as their father, and their countless tutors (possibly referencing Apollos and Cephas, but probably in reference to their current teachers, the ones opposed to Paul). In Greek/Roman society tutors were slaves that cared for children. Such might do a good job in caring for and instructing a child, but their esteem was nothing compared to the father.
3. And since Paul was their father, he urged them to imitate him (vs. 16). Children are suppose to imitate the father, and in Greek/Roman society children were expected to enter the same kind of work as their fathers.
 - » Paul is not trying to gather a personal fol-

lowing. Rather, as Paul would urge in 11.1, he wants them to imitate him as he was trying to imitate Christ. God still takes center stage!

- » In context of what Paul has said up to this point, imitating Paul (their spiritual father) would require them to a)reject the wisdom of the world for the foolishness of God, b) boast only in the Lord, c)become fools for Christ's sake, knowing that following Him might require the loss of much.
4. Since Paul was concerned for his children, he had already sent Timothy to them (vs. 17), who would remind them of Paul's ways so that they could again imitate their spiritual father.
- » Paul said that Timothy's message to them was "just as I teach everywhere in every church." This is not the only place in the letter that Paul references a uniformity of doctrine and practice in the churches (see also 7.17; 11.16; 14.33).
 - » It has become increasingly popular to discount much of what Paul says in this letter (and other epistles) as being limited by cultural context. However, Paul's words to the Corinthians were the same that he taught everywhere!
 - » We would do well to heed all that Paul and the apostles said and did.
5. Paul was coming to them, and they had a choice in how Paul would approach them (vss. 18-21). Their father could come to them with words of praise, or he could come with the rod of discipline (vs. 21). However, one thing was certain: those who had become arrogant against Paul would have their words tested by the apostle, to see if they contained the true power of the gospel (i.e. the ability to transform lives).