



The Call for Church Unity -- 1 Corinthians 4:6-21

Paul has spent the past five verses talking about the role of leaders and how they should be viewed by the congregation. Leaders are servants and stewards, they are called to faithfulness, and they will be judged by God alone. Now Paul's attention is turned directly to the Corinthian congregation with an impassioned call for unity. He does this by warning them not to be arrogant, rebuking them strongly, and admonishing them as a spiritual father.

I. A Warning Against Arrogance

Previously in 1 Corinthians, Paul had described himself and Apollos as stewards, servants, under-rowers, farmers, and builders. He and Apollos are humble examples that the Corinthians should imitate. He instructs the Corinthians not to ***“go beyond what is written”*** meaning that their self-assessment should be in accordance with what is taught in Scripture. Paul has demonstrated his faith in Scripture by quoting the Old Testament in four places (1:19, 31; 3:19, 20). He warns the church not to be ***“puffed up”*** or arrogant. If they follow Scripture they will not be filled with pride and they will avoid the partisan factions that had been harming the church.

The Corinthian Christians had no reason to boast in self because all they had comes from God. This lesson is driven home by three questions: 1) *For who sees anything different in you?* -- All Christians are gifted differently by God. 2) *What do you have that you did not receive?* -- No Christian should feel superior to another because all that anyone has comes from God. 3) *If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?* -- Again the Corinthian Christians had no reason to boast because God had provided all they had.

1. How did Paul and Apollos demonstrate their own lack of arrogance and pride?

2. What are some of the reasons why Christians boast and what reasons can you provide to prove this is wrong?

II. A Sarcastic Rebuke

3. What is sarcasm and what is its purpose?

Verse 8 is a continuation of Paul's previous thought about being “puffed up” as he now attacks the arrogance of the Corinthian Christians with a series of sarcastic questions. Through these questions Paul forcefully challenges the Corinthians to look at themselves and the divisive way in which they have been behaving.

4. What sarcastic statements does Paul make in verse 8 and what is the purpose of these statements?

If the Corinthian Christians were what they thought they were (kings) then Paul would like to reign along with them and if they had possessed the spiritual maturity and blessings they thought they did then Paul would have been pleased for them and would want to be like them.

Paul viewed himself and the other apostles, not as kings, but far differently as he describes in 9-13. The word translated as **“exhibited”** means “to display as on a stage, or in an amphitheater, to place in public view -- before the eyes of the world.”¹ They were as men sentenced to death and history teaches that every apostle besides John (who died in exile) was martyred. The world, angels, and men looked on as the apostles suffered humility and execution.



5. What three ironic or sarcastic statements does Paul make in verse 10 and what do they mean?

a.

b.

c.

The apostles were men acquainted with suffering as Paul describes in verse 11-13. They were, even as Paul wrote, going without proper nourishment and clothing as they traveled about (compare 2 Corinthians 11:27). They were **“buffeted”** or beaten severely and had no homes. Even as they endured such difficulty it was necessary for them to work with their hands to provide as best they could for their own needs. When persecuted the apostles they responded with grace.

6. How did the apostles react to being reviled, persecuted, and slandered?

7. According to verse 13, how did the world view the apostles?

III. A Fatherly Admonishment

Lest we think that Paul is overly harsh in his writing, we see his heart of love in verse 14 and following. His desire was not to make the Corinthian Christians ashamed, but to bring a change in their behaviour.

8. How does Paul refer to the Corinthians in verse 14?

In the remainder of the chapter Paul admonishes, teaches, and encourages the Corinthian Christians with the hope that they might change their arrogant attitudes and develop Christian unity.

First is a Warning

Paul admonishes (sternly corrects while showing the proper course of action) the church in Corinth. Paul's purpose was not to bring sorrow and shame, but to see corrected action. The previous verses in chapter four are also a part of the warning or admonishment.

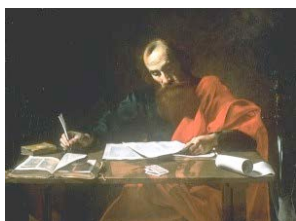
Second, is the Example of a Spiritual Father

Paul describes how he serves as an example to the church. He is not their guide or tutor, but their father. Any Christian teacher who provided Biblical instruction could be a tutor, but a person could have only one father. Though tutors may be loved, respected, and important to one's spiritual growth, only one person could be a spiritual father; the one who introduced them to Christ. Paul was the spiritual father of all the Corinthian Christians since he planted the church in Corinth (vs. 15).

As an example Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians to imitate him. He is not trying to further develop factions in the church, but to encourage these Christians to live like he lived.

Third, is the Provision for Further Teaching

Timothy was sent to the church in Corinth (Acts 19:22) to provide additional teaching and admonishment. Timothy was Paul's beloved son in the Lord because he had led Timothy to Christ. Timothy was *"faithful"* so Paul had confidence in both his ability and his integrity. Timothy's role would be to remind the Corinthians of how Paul lived among them as an apostle and preacher of the gospel and to remind the Corinthians of what Paul had taught.

Fourth, is the Hope of a Future Visit

Paul wanted to come to them after Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8), but that did not happen (2 Cor. 1:15ff). We note that Paul places his desire to visit within the scope of God's will. "Our best plans are sometimes vetoed by the Lord when doors are closed, finances are exhausted, sickness intervenes, projects are not in a condition that can be abandoned, obligations to others must be fulfilled, etc, etc."²

9. Why would the belief that Paul was not coming cause some to be arrogant? (vs. 18)

10. What is the difference between "talk" and "power" in verses 19-20 and where should this power be evident?

11. What two possibilities existed for how Paul would react to the Corinthians when he visited and what would determine which he would choose?

Unity is vital in the church and all Christians must avoid any attitude of arrogance by realising that all good things come from God and not self. Christians must be ready to change behaviour when admonished truthfully from Scripture. Unity will be developed as Christians plant their lives and faith firmly in the Scriptures living lives that powerfully attest to faithfulness in God's Kingdom.