

Study 5: 1st Corinthians Chapter 4

Introduction

In chapter 4, Paul concludes what we might regard almost as “introductory remarks” although they are far from that (since he has dealt a great deal with the fragmentation issues in the church). The later chapters get into the meatier issues, and Paul doesn’t back away from confronting the issues head on.

Body of the Study

Discussion on Stewardship

A clarification of the issues

The Labour of the apostles

A call for consistent teaching & practice

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *What are the implications of vs 5 for judging others? Is Paul saying that we shouldn’t do it?*
- *How does the “lifestyle” of the apostles challenge our own lifestyle? What had they given up for the sake of the gospel? How does that compare with our lifestyle and environment?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 5 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 5: Chapter 4

Introduction

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Body of the Study

Discussion on Stewardship

Paul labours the point of the subservient position of the leaders once again. He says that they are to be considered “...as servants of Christ...” The point that he is making is that Christ is the head, and that neither he (Paul), nor Apollos, nor any of the other apostles, nor any other minister has any position of relevance. God revealed to the apostles the things that he wanted man to know (Jn 14:25-26; 16:12-15) and the apostles have fulfilled their duty in revealing these things to us. They did not “make up” their theology, nor were they like the Greek philosophers who had taken on the task of discovering or inventing truth, but as Christ’s ministers (servants) they have merely delivered the message.

He then uses a second example – that of a steward. The example is that of a household, where God is the owner and master of the house, and he (and others) are merely servants (stewards) in the household. It is not the responsibility of the servants to provide the food and things for the house – that is the master’s responsibility. The steward’s responsibility is to administer the things that have been provided. But Paul says that they are stewards of the mysteries of God – their responsibilities are to see that the mysteries of God (ie the gospel) are taught and dispensed as the master has instructed them.

But he doesn’t leave the stewardship issue there, for he adds that “...it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful...” (1:4:2). If the apostles faithfully passed on to us all that God had revealed to them, then nothing more could be asked of them.

Paul knows of nothing that he has left undone in discharging his accountability as a servant and steward. It may be that others might find fault with him, but from his own perspective, he has done everything in his power to serve God. This is exactly consistent with what we know of Paul’s life and work. But in the end, it is the Lord – *not Paul* – who is in the position of making judgement on the matter, and he is quite happy to leave things in God’s hands. When the Lord returns, then the hidden things will be revealed, and the true hearts of men made known and revealed. Paul neither wants nor deserves any praise for the work that he has done and is doing, and the true praise comes from God (1:4:5).

A clarification of the issues

The problem was outlined in 1:1:112 – there was division in the congregation. Paul clarifies the issue here for us. The division was not over those *outside* of the congregation, but of those *within* the congregation. Apollos, Paul, and Peter were merely illustrative of the issue which was “...figuratively transferred to (Paul) and Apollos...” (1:4:6).

The real issue was that they were “...puffed up ...one against the other...” so, the question comes further – what was the root of the problem, and how was it manifested? Looking at the time and effort that Paul puts in later on the spiritual gift issue, it would seem likely that the digression

may well have been over that issue, and the coveting that some had about their gifts (1:12:31 (particularly KJV)).

So, Paul applies the example of himself and the other apostles – as servants and stewards – as to how the Corinthians ought to behave. Everyone should follow their examples, both as stewards and as Paul adds “...*not to go beyond what is written...*” (1:4:6).

The underlying issue here is one of authority. He has already addressed the authority issue by showing that the apostles are *stewards who faithfully deliver the message*, yet the apostles were more than that, since they spoke by inspiration. We will deal with this in some more detail in chapter 7, but when the apostles spoke, what they were delivering was the word of God, and therefore was authoritative (c/f 1:14:37).

Paul specifically writes that we “...*are not to go beyond what is written...*” - ie that we need to go to the scriptures for our authority, and if we cannot find in them the authority for the things that we do, then we must not go there (c/f 1 Jn:9).

In 1:4:7, Paul expands the former thoughts a little further. The contentions from amongst the Corinthians were boasting about something. If we accept that the boasting was about the spiritual gifts, then the verse makes a lot of sense. They had *received* the gifts – although not everyone had them, but the distribution of the gifts was sufficient for their spiritual growth and establishment. Not everyone had the same gift (1:12:7-11), and there were some who had (*undoubtedly*) not received any miraculous gifts. But they are arguing about who’s gift was better, and jostling for positions of power as a result. Importantly, the superiority of the gifts was due to the grace of God who gave it, rather than anything that the receiver had done in receiving the gifts!

The Corinthians were boasting and rejoicing in what they saw as their superior position. Paul deals with them as a matter of irony (sarcasm) “...*you have reigned as kings without us (the apostles)!...*” In their self exalted position, they did not see any need for what the apostles could bring to them and teach them. They were self-deceived. The next move is to show the labour and love of the apostles for the Lord.

The Labour of the apostles

Rather than being in a position to be desired, the opposite is true regarding an apostle. They were men condemned to death. Of the 14 apostles (the original 12 plus Matthias to replace Judas, and Paul who (in essence) replaced James, the only one to die a natural death was John. His brother James was the first of the apostles to die (not counting Judas Iscariot), and he was put to death by Herod by being killed with a sword (Acts 12:2). The Jews continually harassed Paul, and time and again they sought to put him to death. Eventually he was killed by the Romans. He says that the apostles have been “...*displayed as a spectacle to the world...*” (1:4:9).

What is interesting here is the contrast that Paul draws. The apostles *rightly* had a position of honour, yet with that position came disregard – a spectacle along the lines of a condemned criminal brought into an arena to be made a public gazing stock and put to death. In contrast, to the Corinthians, from a human point of view, the apostles would be regarded as fools, whilst they were boasting about their wisdom! The contrast between the two could not be more stark, and Paul outlines it “...*fools & wise...weak & strong...dishonoured & distinguished...*”.

On a physical basis, the apostles had nothing to boast about. They were “...*hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, beaten, homeless...laboured with their own hands...reviled...persecuted...defamed...made as the filth of the world...*” (1:4:10-13).

The Corinthians might have thought that having the pre-eminent position in the church was something to be desired. Of course, that position is reserved for Christ! On a physical basis, the position of the apostles was a special place “...*and he gave some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers...*” (1:12:28). But the perceived benefits are a two edged sword! So, Paul says “...*I warn you....*” (1:4:14).

A call for consistent teaching & practice

There might be many teachers who could instruct people in their christian walk, and it would seem that the Corinthians were seeking to be teachers (or in the leadership positions). Yet in contrast, there can only be one person who has led them to Christ, and for the Corinthians, that person was Paul. He was their father in the faith – not in the sense that he had a title of “Fr Paul”, but in the same sense that he regarded Timothy as “...*my own son in the faith...*” (1 Tim 1:2). He had nurtured them as a father nurtures his children, and he urges them to imitate him just as a father would urge his children.

To help them to deal with these issues, Paul is sending Timothy who will ensure that things are put in order.

Note that Paul makes the comment here, that the thing that Timothy will do is to remind them of what Paul teaches. But what he teaches is always consistent “...*as I teach everywhere in every church...*” (1:4:17). These things are not optional, nor are they to be applied inconsistently, and since the apostles were authoritative and consistent, then these same things are to be heeded by every church in every location in every generation! [That of course, needs to fit into the context, and with applied hermeneutics – how we determine what applies and what doesn’t].

The immediate reaction of the Corinthians might be that Paul is sending Timothy because he is afraid to come himself. But Paul says that he is coming, Lord willing, shortly. And when he comes, it could be with a rod, or it could be with a spirit of nurture and gentleness. How he comes to them will depend on what he finds – and that is squarely in the domain of the Corinthians.