

I CORINTHIANS: HANDLING BELIEVERS' PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

II. Handling Divisions Among Believers, 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21

G. Heeding Paul's Example Of Unifying Spirituality (1 Corinthians 4:6-21)

I. Introduction

- A. The people Paul disciplined in Corinth lived in a city that was known for its immorality, alcoholism and worldly pursuits (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, "Introduction to the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians: The City of Corinth," p. 1619), so the formidable influence of the city's culture on the Corinthian believers left Paul addressing "(a)berrant beliefs and practices of an astonishing variety" in his letters to them, Ibid.
- B. However, in a vision Paul received from God as he ministered at Corinth in Acts 18:10b NIV, God told him, "I have many people in this city," so Paul was to keep on ministering regardless of the trials he faced there.
- C. This epistle is timely for us who face our own decadent culture today, so we view 1 Corinthians 4:6-21 where Paul exemplified unifying spirituality in his relating to his divisive readers in the Church at Corinth (as follows):

II. Heeding Paul's Example Of Unifying Spirituality, 1 Corinthians 4:6-21.

- A. From 1 Corinthians 4:6a, we learn that Paul had "avoided singling out guilty persons by name" thus far in his epistle by applying "the problem cases to Apollos and himself (and Peter and Christ; cf. 1:12; 3:4-6, 22-33)," Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 512. Such discretion fit the readers' key sin – pride, 1 Corinthians 4:6b; Ibid.
- B. Paul explained that there was no logical basis for their pride, for only God made them differ from each other, and only God was responsible for the spiritual gifts they each had received from Him for ministry, 1 Cor. 4:7.
- C. In 1 Corinthians 4:8-13, Paul used "biting irony" to contrast "the imagined exaltation of the Corinthians with the degradation and distress which were the apostles' daily lot," Ibid., Ryrie, fn. to 1 Corinthians 4:8-13:
 - 1. Paul critiqued his readers' presumed self-exaltation (1 Corinthians 4:8a), ironically adding that he indeed wished they were exalted that his ministry team and the other apostles might reign with them, 1 Cor. 4:8b!
 - 2. In reality, Paul considered that God had assigned the apostles of Christ as last, as it were appointed to death, for they were made as it were a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men, 1 Corinthians 4:9.
 - 3. Where the apostles were treated as fools for Christ's sake, as weak, as despised, the Corinthians viewed themselves as wise, strong and honorable, 1 Corinthians 4:10.
 - 4. The apostles suffered hunger, thirst, clothing shortages, beatings, homelessness, and laboring by working with their own hands for a livelihood, 1 Corinthians 4:11-12a. When reviled, they blessed, when persecuted, they endured, when slandered, they entreated, having become like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things in contrast to how the Corinthian believers viewed themselves, 1 Corinthians 4:12b-13.
- D. The apostle added that he was not writing these comments to shame his readers, but to admonish them as his beloved spiritual children, for though they had many guides in Christ, he alone had led them to Christ as their spiritual father, 1 Corinthians 4:14-15. Paul thus asked that they follow his example of humility, v. 16.
- E. Paul added that for this reason he had sent them Timothy, his beloved and faithful child whom he had led to Christ, to remind his readers of Paul's ways in Christ, 1 Corinthians 4:17.
- F. Some of Paul's readers were arrogant as if he were not coming to them to hold them accountable for their behavior, but he assured them that he would come to them soon if the Lord willed, and when he arrived, he would find out not the talk of the arrogant people in their midst, but their spiritual power, 1 Corinthians 4:18-19. The kingdom of God did not consist in mere talk but in power, so Paul asked his readers if they wanted him to come to them with a disciplinary rod as one who possessed life-and-death apostolic power, or with love in a spirit of gentleness, 1 Corinthians 4:20-21; Acts 5:1-11.

Lesson: In countering the carnality of his readers, Paul critiqued their basic problem, that of false pride in ministry, revealing how illogical it was since everything they had by way of spiritual life and gifting for ministry was a divine provision by God's grace, His unmerited favor. Paul also indicated that true spirituality was not only exhibited in personal humility, but the demonstration of active supernatural power that worked through a godly believer as he used the spiritual gifting God had given him to serve the Lord.

Application: (1) May we follow Paul's example to walk humbly before the Lord in living for Him and serving Him. (2) May we thus also be willing to shoulder the sufferings of Christ in our lives and ministries like Paul and the other apostles did! (3) May we also function like Paul in not making false boasts, but in relying on the Lord to use the spiritual gift that He has given us to serve by His supernatural power in the work that He assigns us.