

1 CORINTHIANS: MOVING FROM THE CARNAL TO THE SPIRITUAL STATE

Part IX: Countering Carnal Divisions By Mimicking The Apostles' Humility

(1 Corinthians 4:6-21)

I. Introduction

- A. Functioning by means of the sin nature, what we term "carnality," is often a challenge in today's churches.
- B. 1 Corinthians was written to carnal believers (1 Corinthians 3:1-3), and 1 Corinthians 4:6-21 shows how the believer can counter carnal divisions over God's servants by mimicking the humility of the apostles of Christ:

II. Countering Carnal Divisions By Mimicking The Apostles' Humility, 1 Corinthians 4:6-21.

- A. As he began to summarize his discussion on divisions in the Church of Corinth, Paul claimed he had used himself and Apollos as illustrations to show that no one should go beyond what was written in Scripture about men, that none of Paul's readers be puffed up with pride against one another, 1 Corinthians 4:6.
- B. This lesson involved viewing humility as a virtue, what was difficult for Paul's readers to do since "the Greeks believed humility was a despicable trait of a slave, a sign of weakness, not a characteristic of great men (Plato *Laws* 6.774c)," Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament, p. 513.
- C. However, in view of Biblical truth, humility is the only option acceptable before God for believers: God gives many gifts to believers for Christian service by His grace (1 Cor. 4:7) to His glory alone (1 Cor. 1:4-9), and "Paul underscored these truths" in a "series of rhetorical questions" in 1 Corinthians 4:7. (Ibid.)
- D. Then, in "biting irony," Paul contrasted "the imagined exaltation of the Corinthians with the degradation and distress which were the apostles' daily lot," 1 Cor. 4:8-13 (Ryrie St. Bible, KJV, 1978, fn. to 1 Cor. 4:8-13):
 - 1. Paul's readers considered themselves to have all they needed (1 Cor. 4:8a ESV) when they should have been hungering and thirsting for the righteousness they needed (Matt. 5:6), Ibid., Bib. Know. Com., N. T.
 - 2. In stunning contrast to the Corinthian believers, Paul likened the apostles of Christ, men who in the spiritual realm were the foundation of the Church (Ephesians 2:20), as needy, 1 Cor. 4:8b ESV.
 - 3. Indeed, the apostles were experientially set forth by God to be considered last of all, men who seemed to be sentenced to death, spectacles to the world, to angels and to men, 1 Corinthians 4:9 ESV.
 - 4. Where the Corinthians viewed themselves as wise in Christ, the apostles were made to function as fools in the world's eyes; where the Corinthians were strong, the apostles appeared weak; where the Corinthians were held in honor, the apostles were in disrepute before the world; 1 Corinthians 4:10 ESV.
 - 5. The apostles suffered hunger and thirst, they were poorly clothed, they were brutally treated and homeless, laboring with their own hands to make a living, 1 Corinthians 4:11-12a ESV, NIV.
 - 6. When reviled, the apostles blessed; when persecuted, they endured; when slandered, they entreated, having become and were still existing as the scum of the world, the refuse of all things, 1 Cor. 4:12b-13 ESV.
- E. Following this section on irony, Paul lovingly sought to warn his readers against their pride, 1 Cor. 4:14-21:
 - 1. Though they may have had many instructors, Paul was their spiritual father in having led them to Christ, so he urged them to be followers of him in becoming humble in place of their pride, 1 Cor. 4:15-16.
 - 2. For this reason, Paul wrote that he had sent Timothy who carried this letter with him to the Corinthians, for Timothy, Paul's beloved son in the faith who was faithful in the Lord, might cause the Corinthians to remember Paul's ways of humility as he taught everywhere in every Church, 1 Corinthians 4:17.
 - 3. Paul noted that some of his Corinthian readers were arrogant as if he was not coming to them to hold them accountable to heed his word as an apostle (1 Cor. 4:18), but Paul claimed he would come to them soon if God willed and discover not the talk of the proud people but their spiritual power, 1 Corinthians 4:19. The kingdom of God was not a matter of mere talk, but spiritual power (1 Cor. 4:20), so Paul warned his readers, asking if they wanted him to come with a rod, using his spiritual power as an apostle to discipline them (cf. Acts 5:1-11) or that he arrive with love and a spirit of gentleness, 1 Corinthians 4:21!

Lesson: *Carnal divisions in the church over mortal human personalities is sharply contrasted by the humility of the apostles as directed by the plan of God, teaching that all believers must view themselves and everyone else in the body as recipients of God's unmerited favor. Failure to follow the example of the apostles' humility can lead to severe discipline from the Lord, so God directs us to consider the pathway of humility as a necessary route in life.*

Application: *(1) May we believers recall that God's sheer grace is the vehicle by which we are saved, gifted and assigned ministries of the Lord that we not be lifted up with pride in ministry, but follow the example of the apostles to serve in humility. (2) May we also recall that humility is not an option, but that it is enforced by God!*