

Christians Gone Wild!
1st Corinthians, week 10
Power from Jesus (1 Corinthians 4:14–21)
March 12, 2006
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For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.
1 Corinthians 4:20

In this section of Scripture, Paul painfully reveals his heart. He had labored hard to birth the church in Corinth, only to see it grow up to be a bratty kid too arrogant to listen to their father. So, like a good father, Paul sternly instructs the church, giving them an opportunity to repent or face discipline.

¹⁴I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. ¹⁵Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

In the previous section Paul told the church how greatly he had suffered for their sake. Here he explains that his motive was not to shame them, but rather to express his deep love and concern for them in light of their arrogance and sin.

Paul then reveals that his heart for his church is akin to a fathers' heart for his children. In saying this, Paul is not contradicting Jesus' teaching that we call no one Father but God (Matthew 23:9). Rather, he is saying that while God alone is ultimately our Father, a pastor does a lot of fathering. Like a father is present at the physical birth of a child and responsible for the raising of that child, a pastor is present at the spiritual birth of a Christian through the preaching of the gospel and likewise responsible for the training and discipline of that person to bring them to maturity. Subsequently, there should be a respect for training and discipline from godly leader(s) in the church, especially the lead leader.

Paul's sadness is revealed as his people had little regard for his teaching and little respect for his authority. In this way they were acting like children who saw no difference between the role of their father and the role of their guardians (e.g., sports coaches, school teachers, nannies, babysitters).

¹⁶Therefore I urge you to imitate me. ¹⁷For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

Unlike our culture of rugged individualism and rebellion against authority, children in Paul's day were expected to respect, honor, obey, and imitate their father. Likewise, as a spiritual father Paul expected the Corinthian Christians to follow both his teaching and lifestyle as exemplary. In this Paul is not declaring that he is without sin or perfect, but that his doctrine and practice were "above reproach" and worthy of being imitated.

In this we see the importance of both doctrine and character in the Christian life. If someone's doctrine is sound, but their life is sinful they are guilty of dead orthodoxy. If someone's doctrine is sinful, but their life is sound they are guilty of living heresy. But if someone's doctrine and life are both sound they embody living orthodoxy, like Paul.

¹⁸Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. ¹⁹But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. ²⁰For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.

Like most problems, the root of all the trouble in Corinth was simply arrogant pride. Like the constant parade of email chains, blogs, text messages, cell phone drivel, internet chat rooms, and talk-radio nonsense, the Corinthians talked a good game but never really did much of anything except critique people like Paul who were doing something. In this way they are prototypical of armchair Christians who sit in the stands and talk trash but never suit up. Because Paul had left town to minister in other areas, some grew so arrogant as to suggest that he lacked the courage to confront them.

Paul responded to his critics with a tongue-lashing, saying that God's kingdom is not about chatter but power. In essence he is pushing back on his critics, asking if they had planted any churches or seen anyone healed, saved, or delivered from demons. Humorously, this would be akin to an athlete walking into the stands to hand the ball to an out-of-shape armchair quarterback, only to see them wet their pants and spill their nachos all over themselves.

²¹What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

Paul concludes by giving the church a choice: he could come with a tender hand of love or a firm hand of discipline, depending on their response. In this we see that true Christian leadership accepts that, at times, being tough and embracing conflict is the only way for God's kingdom to advance. Like Jesus said in Matthew 11:12, "...the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it."

Verses for next week: 1 Corinthians 5:1–13