

Chapter 6: True Christian Ministry

1 Corinthians 3:18–4:21

If the church is the temple of God, then what role should ministers in the church play in that temple? How should the Corinthians—and all congregations—relate to the leaders whom Jesus Christ has appointed over them? Furthermore, what role and status should regular members of the congregations claim? Finally, why has God organized his church this way? What is he seeking to accomplish in this world and the next through his church and his church’s leadership?

In 1 Corinthians 3:18–4:21, Paul addresses the true nature of Christian ministry. The Corinthians were spending their time bickering, backbiting, and dividing into various factions as they rallied around particular leaders, and Paul rebukes their entire outlook on Christian ministry. The Corinthians, Paul explains, both held their leaders in too high and too low an estimation. They esteemed their ministers too much by boasting in the ministers, rather than in Christ whom the ministers served. Then, they esteemed their ministers too little by failing to follow their ministers as their ministers led them to Christ. In 1 Corinthians 3:18–4:21, Paul argues that *King Jesus appoints ministers to administer the rule of his reign in his church.*

Ministers are Servants (1 Cor. 3:18–4:5)

After his extended discussion of the nature of Christ’s Church as God’s field and even God’s temple (1 Cor. 3:5–17), Paul circles back to his original subject: the Corinthians’ foolish, sinful attempts to pursue human wisdom. Paul speaks bluntly, urging the Corinthians not to allow themselves to be deceived by thinking that they are wise according to the standards of the age (1 Cor. 3:18). Instead, Paul writes paradoxically that the only way to become wise is to become a fool first. Rather than approving and encouraging the human philosophy filling the minds of the Corinthians, Paul rebukes them, insisting they “must be empty in order to be filled.”¹ By Christ’s cross and resurrection, God has demonstrated how thoroughly confused the world has become because of sin: “Everything is end for end: wisdom is folly, folly is wisdom; weakness is power; leaders are servants; God’s people are nobodies, yet possess all things (vv. 22–23; 2 Cor. 6:9–10).”² The foolishness of God—especially in the folly of the cross—is wiser than men (1 Cor. 1:25). Therefore, in order to become wise, Paul insists that the Corinthians must first become fools (1 Cor. 3:18).

The Folly of the Wisdom of this World (1 Cor. 3:19)

Indeed, Paul declares that God judges the wisdom of the world as folly (1 Cor. 3:19). This does

¹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 60.

² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 164.

not mean that all human learning is folly, but only that human learning becomes folly when it fails to acknowledge its own limitations: “They are confined, however, within their own limits; for into God’s heavenly kingdom they cannot penetrate. Hence they must occupy the place of handmaid, not of mistress: nay more, they must be looked upon as empty and worthless, until they have become entirely subject to the word and Spirit of God.”³ Thus, even the best of human learning becomes foolishness when by promising more than it can provide, such as lasting joy, peace, and satisfaction outside of Christ—but, more than that, there is much that passes for human learning that is simply foolishness without any value whatsoever.⁴ Whether human wisdom encourages outright rebellion against Christ, or whether it merely distracts us from Christ, that human wisdom is utter folly in the eyes of God.

Now, the seeking after human wisdom is not a new problem. Indeed, the desire to become wise apart from God was the motivation for the very first human sin (Gen. 3:6). Beyond that first sin, Paul cites two Old Testament texts from Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11 where God demonstrates the folly of pitting human wisdom against God. The first text from Job 5:13 uses “the imagery of hunting, in which the hunter uses the very craftiness, or cunning, of the prey as the means of capture.”⁵ This capture is not the end of a playful game, but something more like the capture of a crafty criminal who is then punished for his crimes.⁶ The second text from Psalm 94:11 reveals that the Lord knows that the thoughts of the worldly wise are worthless and useless.⁷ God does not merely *think* he has the better hand—he knows it. He has searched the depths of human wisdom and found them lacking in comparison with his eternal wisdom that sent forth Jesus Christ into the world in the fullness of time.

All Things are Yours (1 Cor. 3:21–22)

Therefore, Paul instructs the Corinthians not to “boast in men” (1 Cor. 3:21). Earlier, Paul insisted that no human being will be able to boast in the presence of God (1 Cor. 1:29), and that whoever boasts must boast only in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:31). In all of these cases, the idea of “boasting” means to trust in some person or thing “as the ground of confidence, or as the source of honour or blessedness. It is to regard ourselves as blessed because of our relation to it. Thus men are said to glory in the Lord, or in the cross; because God, or Christ as crucified, is regarded as the ground of

³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 145. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.x.iv.html>>

⁴ “There are two senses in which this is true, or in which wisdom may be said to be folly. Even truth or true knowledge becomes folly, if employed to accomplish an end for which it is not adapted. If a man attempts to make men holy or happy; if he undertakes to convert the world, by mathematics, or metaphysics, or moral philosophy, he is foolish, and his wisdom, as a means to that end, is folly. He must renounce all dependence on those means if he would accomplish that end. But in the second place, much that passes for wisdom among men is in itself, and not merely as a means to an end, foolishness. Both these ideas are evidently comprehended in the apostle’s statement. He means to say that human knowledge is entirely inadequate to save men; because that end can only be accomplished by the gospel. And he means also to brand as folly the speculations of men about ‘the deep things of God.’” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 60–61.)

⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 165.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 152.

⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 165.

confidence and the source of blessedness. Others are said to glory in the flesh, in the law, or even in themselves.”⁸ By “men,” Paul does not refer to *males* only, but this is the word he has been using frequently in this section to refer to human, worldly wisdom (cf. 1 Cor. 2:5, 9, 14; 3:3, 4). So, to “boast in men” is the equivalent of taking confidence in worldly wisdom. Of course, if human wisdom is folly, then it is also folly to boast (that is, to take confidence in) the human beings who possess this wisdom. In what way, though, were the Corinthians boasting in men?

It is important to remember the original context of Paul’s statements against human wisdom from 1 Corinthians 1:10–17. There, Paul revealed that the Corinthians were grouping together in factions that rallied around a particular human leader. Some were boasting in Paul, others were boasting in Apollos, and still others were boasting in Cephas (1 Cor. 1:12). Literally, they were saying, “I am *of Paul*,” or “I am *of Apollos*,” or “I am *of Cephas*”—that is, they were boasting in those leaders by claiming to belong to them. Here, Paul turns their phrase around by saying that “All things are *of you*, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are *of you*” (1 Cor. 3:21b–22).⁹ What, though, does Paul mean by distinguishing that the Corinthians should not *boast* in human, worldly wisdom, but that all things *belong* to the Corinthians?

In this context, it is helpful to consider the classical theological distinction between the *enjoyment* and the *use* of someone or something. This distinction was most famously articulated by the church father Augustine (354–430 AD), who wrote: “Among all the things there are, therefore, those alone are to be enjoyed which we have noted as being eternal and unchanging, while the rest are to be used, in order that we may come at last to the enjoyment of the former sort.”¹⁰ Augustine’s point is that we can only find true, lasting, eternal satisfaction in God, who is eternal and unchanging. If we attempt to seek ultimate, maximal, lasting *enjoyment* in anyone or anything else, we make that person or thing into an idol. Because only God is eternal and unchanging, only God can bear the weight of our worship, while all other people and things will ultimately change, corrupt, decay, die, and pass away, so that they cannot supply us with the full enjoyment that we may seek from them.

Rather than seeking to *enjoy* all other people and things in this world, Augustine says that we must only *use* them. Now, by the word “used,” Augustine does not mean “used *and abused*,” as we so often mean when we talk about how someone has been “used.” Rather, Augustine means that we must recognize all things in this world as means to the ultimate end of enjoying and glorifying

⁸ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 61.

⁹ “These words are predicated on the final theological conclusion to come (v. 23), in which this statement is repeated and the ultimate basis added: ‘All things are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.’ With these words Paul completely transforms their slogans. They say (lit.), ‘I am *of Paul*, etc.’ With the analogy of the field (vv. 5–9) Paul changed that to ‘*you are of God*.’ Now he makes the further transformation, ‘*All things are of you*, including Paul, Apollos, and Cephas.’ This turns their slogans completely on their head, with the significant difference that the pronoun is plural, not singular.” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 166.)

¹⁰ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, translated by Edmund Hill, edited by John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 114.

God.¹¹ In 1 Corinthians 3:21b–22, Paul is arguing not that we may greedily pursue all things in this world for our greedy enjoyment, but that God has given us all things in this world for the sake of our *use*—our use in leading us to the greater enjoyment of God. Every Christian leader, everything in the material world, and even the fullness of life and death, the present and the future—God has given us all these things as resources to conform us to the image of Christ. Elsewhere, Paul makes a similar point: “And we know that for those who love God *all things* work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

You are Christ’s (1 Cor. 3:23a)

The foundation of this doctrine is that Christ is the sole foundation—and, therefore, the sole master—of his Church (1 Cor. 3:11). Or, as Paul puts it in v. 23, “you are Christ’s.” That is, we belong to Christ alone, and God has given us Christ alone for our lasting, eternal, satisfying *enjoyment*. We may *enjoy* Christ not so much because he belongs to us but because we belong to him. The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism brings out well the blessings of our belonging to Christ:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.¹²

All things are ours *because* we are Christ’s.

If Christ is the sole master of his Church, then individual Christian leaders are not masters over Christ’s people, but servants to Christ.¹³ In this way, Paul insists that Christians must not limit themselves to the narrowness of individual Christian leaders, since God has given his Church a great fullness in Christ.¹⁴ Thus, God is working all things toward the total redemption of his Church, and God has actually given his Church all things for their possession, enjoyment, and benefit.¹⁵ Beyond

¹¹ “What I mean by charity or love is any urge of the spirit to find joy in God for his own sake, and in oneself and one’s neighbor for God’s sake; by cupidity or greed any impulse of the spirit to find joy in oneself and one’s neighbor, and in any kind of bodily thing at all, not for God’s sake.” (Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 176.)

¹² Heidelberg Catechism, Question #1.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 146–47. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.x.iv.html>>

¹⁴ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 69.

¹⁵ “There are two senses in which the declaration, ‘All things are yours,’ may be understood. It means that all things are designed to promote the interests of the church. The consummation of the work of redemption is the great end to which all things are directed, and to which they are to be made subservient. And secondly, the church is the heir of the world, Rom. 4, 13. All things are given to Christ as the head of the church, and to the

leaders, Paul says that Christ possesses and orders *all* things for the benefit of his people. This includes the whole world, life and death, the present and the future (1 Cor. 3:22). Paul attacks the narrow, parochial vision of the Corinthians by holding in front of them the glorious riches of their inheritance.

Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3:23b)

The logic of 1 Corinthians 3:21b–23a, then, goes like this: (1) Because Christ is the foundation of his temple, then (2) all things are yours (i.e., for your *use*), for (3) you are Christ's. Paul takes this logic one step further, then, when he writes, "Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:23b). What exactly does this statement mean? In the context of this letter, we have seen Paul argue that Christ is the wisdom of God and the power of God (1 Cor. 1:24). Furthermore, we have seen that the plan to send Christ into the world is "God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory" (1 Cor. 2:7 NASB). That is, the redemptive plan for the Son to take upon himself a human nature, to suffer, to die, and to be resurrected, is the pinnacle of God's glorious wisdom in this world.

Thus, to say that "Christ is God's" does not mean in the least that God the Son is inferior to God the Father. In his divine nature, the Son is equal with the Father.¹⁶ Instead, this means that the Son, though he shared the same divine nature as the Father in equality, nevertheless willingly subjected himself to obedience as the human being, Jesus of Nazareth (Phil. 2:6–7).¹⁷ Then, in this human nature, the Son accomplished the fullness of the divine plan that the Father, Son, and Spirit had predestined before the ages as the Christ who must submissively obey his Father, suffer for the sins of his people, die on the cross, be resurrected on the third day, and reign at the right hand as Lord. In his humanity he fulfilled the anointed offices of the Christ (lit., the "Anointed One"), by becoming

church in him. For his people are to reign with him, Rom. 8, 17, and the glory which the Father gave him, he gives them, John 17, 22. The church, which is to be thus exalted, is not any external society with its hierarchy, nor is it the body of poor, imperfect believers as they now are, who for their own good are despised and down-trodden. But it is the consummated church to be formed out of materials now so unpromising. The people of God, however, should not be unmindful of their high destiny, nor act unworthily of it." (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 61–62.)

¹⁶ "This subjection relates to Christ's humanity, for by taking upon him our flesh, he assumed 'the form' and condition 'of a servant,' that he might make himself obedient to his Father in all things. (Philippians 2:7, 8.)" (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 148. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.x.iv.html>>)

¹⁷ "As the church is subject only to Christ, so Christ is subject only to God. The Scriptures speak of a threefold subordination of Christ. 1. A subordination as to the mode of subsistence and operation, of the second, to the first person in the Trinity; which is perfectly consistent with their identity of substance, and equality in power and glory. 2. The voluntary subordination of the Son in his humbling himself to be found in fashion as a man, and becoming obedient unto death, and therefore subject to the limitations and infirmities of our nature. 3. The economical or official subjection of the theanthropos [God-Man]. That is, the subordination of the incarnate Son of God, in the work of redemption and as the head of the church. He that is by nature equal with God becomes, as it were, officially subject to him. The passages the most directly parallel with the one before us as 11, 3, and 15, 28, but in Phil. 2, 6–11. Heb. 1, 3, and in many other passages, the same truth is taught." (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 63.)

our ultimate prophet, priest, and king.¹⁸ For the Son to function as Christ our Mediator is the eternally decreed plan of God, and, as such, the person and work of Christ belongs to God.¹⁹

Servants and Stewards (1 Cor. 4:1)

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul primarily addressed the nature of the church, and then, secondarily, how both leaders and members relate to the church. Now, in 1 Corinthians 4, Paul primarily zooms in from evaluating the church as a whole to consider specifically the interactions between ministers and members within the church. After stating that leaders belong to the members of the church (rather than *vice versa*) in 1 Corinthians 3:21–22, Paul now explains more fully how Christians ought to regard their ministers in 1 Corinthians 4:1.²⁰ Christian leaders belong to members of the Church for their *use*, but not for their *abuse*. Or, as one minister put it to people in the church who were mistreating him, “Gentlemen, I may be your servant, but you are not my master.”²¹ The reason for this is that, while leaders are servants, they are not servants of the church so much as of Christ. Therefore, leaders are not chiefly accountable to the church.²²

Instead, ministers are servants and stewards of Christ (1 Cor. 4:1). The word here for *servants* is not the common word translated as *servant* in the New Testament (*doulos*), but a less frequently used word (*hupēretēs*) that literally means “under-rower” (that is, a common sailor on a ship), but more generally refers to a low class of servants.²³ This word stresses the complete subordination and subjection of ministers to their Master Jesus Christ.²⁴ Such a servant has no freedom, no self-direction, and no significance except insofar as he or she is carrying out the work of the Master.²⁵ By this, Paul insists that, in everything he does, he is only carrying out the instructions of King Jesus.

Still, Paul also states that ministers are more than servants, but also *stewards* (1 Cor. 4:1). Charles Hodge explains the significance of this word:

Stewards (οἰκονόμοι) were generally slaves appointed as managers or overseers. It was their business to direct the affairs of the household, and dispense the provisions. It is as *dispensers* ministers are here called *stewards*. They are to dispense *the mysteries of God*, that is, the truths which God had revealed, and which, as being undiscoverable by human reason, are called

¹⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 158–59.

¹⁹ “In all that pertains to his redemptive office and his work Christ belongs to God, for God sent him, anointed him, glorified him, and thus Christ is God’s.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 158–59.)

²⁰ “*Us* signifies at least Paul and Apollos; possibly Cephas also, but possibly (in view of iv. 6) these two only. Compare iii. 5. If there is restriction it is historical only; what Paul says may, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied generally to the role of ministers within the church.” (Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 99.) My note: along the same lines, the logic of this passage applies to a lesser extent to all leaders in the church.

²¹ Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 64.

²² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 172.

²³ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 64.

²⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 161–62.

²⁵ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 125.

mysteries, into the knowledge of which men must be initiated.²⁶

Since we no longer have such slaves set as stewards to manage and oversee households, Richard B. Hays helps to bridge the cultural gap by suggesting that we think of the Chief of Staff for the President of the United States, or a foreman in charge of a construction crew.²⁷ Like the servant, the steward lives to carry out the will of the Master. Unlike the servant, however, the steward has broader responsibility to oversee the implementation of the work necessary to accomplish the Master's will throughout the entire household.²⁸

Faithful Stewards (1 Cor. 4:2–4)

The phrase “mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1) never refers in Scripture to the sacraments, and the larger context of this letter demonstrates that wisdom refers to the gospel of God's eternally predestined plan to send Christ into the world to be crucified in order to bring us to glory (1 Cor. 2:7).²⁹ Only in the sense that the sacraments signify and seal (i.e., confirm, ratify) God's promises in his word may we interpret “mysteries” to refer to the sacraments, and we must be very clear that this is the secondary, not the primary, sense.³⁰ The responsibility of ministers is to dispense God's word to God's people, just as a steward dispenses provisions to the other servants within the Master's household. Stewards do not have the authority to do otherwise, and, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 4:2, the Master will hold his stewards accountable for their faithfulness. Ministers may not change the Lord's message to suit their congregations, and congregations may not pressure their ministers to do so, since both ministers and congregation alike belong to the Lord (1 Cor. 3:23).³¹ The gospel of Christ and him crucified must not be modified to accommodate any idolatries, whether ancient or modern, whether of human wisdom, eloquence, political correctness, greed, or lust.³²

But, while Paul is accountable, he insists that he is not accountable to the Corinthians themselves, or to any “human court” (1 Cor. 4:3). Literally, the phrase translated as “human court” is “by human day.” Just as the “Day of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8) refers to the day of Christ's judgment at the end of time, so this “human day” refers to the day when human beings pass their own judgment—a period of time that extends through the entirety of human history.³³ Paul insists that successfully passing through the judgment of the Corinthians is the least of his concerns, and that he does not

²⁶ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthian*, 64.

²⁷ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 65.

²⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 162.

²⁹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthian*, 64–65.

³⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 150. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.i.html>>

³¹ “Too many stewards change their orders to please themselves and their congregations; and too many congregations act as though they owned these stewards and as though they are accountable only to them. Because the day of reckoning has not yet come, all concerned feel secure; but this security is a false security.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 163.)

³² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 175.

³³ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 66.

even particularly worry about his own opinions of himself (1 Cor. 4:3). His conscience does not trouble him, but that does not mean that his ministry is “acquitted” (1 Cor. 4:4). While this word *acquitted* is the word that Paul frequently uses to speak of being *justified* by faith, here he is probably not referring to his justification as a person, but to the vindication of his ministry as faithful before God.³⁴ Certainly, this passage does not undercut the fact that believers may have assurance of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ!³⁵ Rather, Paul simply means that the most searching introspection would not be able to evaluate his faithfulness in this regard, since only the Lord can judge the faithfulness of anyone’s work (1 Cor. 4:4).³⁶

This does not mean that ministers should live entirely without human accountability.³⁷ Indeed, as John Calvin writes, “it is the part of a good pastor to submit both his doctrine and his life for examination to the judgment of the Church, and that it is the sign of a good conscience not to shun the light of careful inspection.”³⁸ Indeed, Paul himself sought human accountability from other leaders in the early church. After receiving revelation directly from Jesus Christ, Paul went to Jerusalem to ask the influential leaders of the church to evaluate his doctrine “in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain” (Gal. 1:12; 2:1–2). Paul is not talking about official ecclesiastical examinations of ministers, but to the mere opinions of the Corinthians.³⁹ Paul was not trying to win a popularity contest with the Corinthians, but to remain faithful as a servant and a steward of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, whether in the realm of popular opinion or formal ecclesiastical pronouncements, a minister is ultimately accountable only to the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴⁰

Commendation from God (1 Cor. 4:5)

With all this in mind, Paul urges the Corinthians not to judge anyone prematurely (1 Cor. 4:5). The grammar of the command, “do not pronounce judgment” may have the force of saying, “*Stop* pronouncing judgment.”⁴¹ Not only is the Lord alone capable of judging, but the Lord has deferred

³⁴ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 76–77.

³⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 155–56. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.i.html>>

³⁶ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 70.

³⁷ “This statement of Paul’s does not intend to indicate that all ministers are to be given a free hand to do what they think is right until the Lord at last judges them. What Paul says is that men must not usurp the Lord’s judgment seat and judge the Lord’s ministers according to their own wisdom.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 169.)

³⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 152. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.i.html>>

³⁹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 66.

⁴⁰ “But when a faithful pastor sees that he is borne down by unreasonable and perverse affections, and that justice and truth have no place, he ought to appeal to God, and betake himself to his judgment-seat, regardless of human opinion, especially when he cannot secure that a true and proper knowledge of matters shall be arrived at.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 152. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.i.html>>)

⁴¹ “Arising from all this is an exhortation not to judge (*krinō*) prematurely. The use of *mē* with the present imperative may imply that the Corinthians had been engaging in this activity. ‘Stop judging’ is then the force of it.” (Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 77.)

his final judgment until his *coming*. At that time, Paul says that the Lord will do two things that have not yet happened: (1) he will bring to light things hidden in darkness, and (2) he will disclose the purposes of the heart (1 Cor. 4:5). In this present darkness, we can neither see every *action* that takes place in this world, and we cannot fully see any of the *motivations* in human hearts that drive those actions.⁴² The church can only judge what we can see, which is why all of our judgment is provisional until the day when the Lord comes.⁴³ Therefore, those who live with righteous motivations will seek the one thing that they cannot receive in this world: praise and commendation from God. As Garland observes, “praise was one of the highest goals in the ancient world....It helped identify one’s place in society. Praise bestows honor; blame heaps dishonor.”⁴⁴ Rather than boasting in the praise of this world, Paul lives to gain the praise that God alone gives—and so should we.

Ministers are Mistreated (1 Cor. 4:6–13)

In v. 6, Paul says that he has “applied all these things” to himself and to Apollos for the benefit of the Corinthians. The word translated as “applied” is a complicated word that is only used a handful of other times in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 11, the word means “disguise” (2 Cor. 11:13, 14, 15), while in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, it refers to the Christian hope that the Lord Jesus Christ will “transform” our lowly bodies to be like his own when he returns (Phil. 3:21). The basic sense of the word, then, has to do with a change of form, although that form could refer to one’s mere outward appearance (“disguise”) or to one’s nature (“transform”). In this case, Paul seems to be using the former meaning, saying that he has used a variety of different metaphors and descriptions to explain the coordinated work of him and Apollos among the Corinthians: farm workers (1 Cor. 3:5–9a), construction workers (1 Cor. 3:10–17), and, finally, servants and stewards (1 Cor. 4:1–5).⁴⁵ Paul states that he has applied/disguised “all these things” to himself and to Apollos, so it is possible that he is even referring to everything he has written since 1 Corinthians 1:10 when he first raised the issue of partisan division within the church.⁴⁶

How, then, has all this been for the “benefit” of the Corinthians? First, Paul clarifies that he and Apollos are not competitive with one another, and that the Corinthians alone are responsible for dividing up their work in fleshly rivalry.⁴⁷ Still, Paul is careful to rebuke them with affection and love, calling them “brothers.”⁴⁸ Paul gives greater clarity to his intentions when he explains that he

⁴² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 156. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.i.html>>

⁴³ “The church cannot judge the heart. Whether a man is sincere or insincere in his professions, whether his experience is genuine or spurious, God only can decide. The church can only judge of what is outward. If any man profess to be holy, and yet is immoral, the church is bound to reject him, as Paul clearly teaches in a following chapter. Or if he profess to be a Christian, and yet rejects Christianity, or any of its essential doctrines, he cannot be received, Tit. 3, 10. But “the counsels of the heart” the Searcher of hearts only can judge.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 69.)

⁴⁴ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 129.

⁴⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 181–82.

⁴⁶ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 68.

⁴⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 174.

⁴⁸ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 77–78.

wants them to learn “not to go beyond what is written....” This is a notoriously difficult passage to translate, since the Greek suggests that Paul is quoting some kind of expression, but we do not know what he is referencing. Very literally translated, Paul writes, “that by us *you* may learn the ‘not beyond what is written’....” Everywhere in Paul, the phrase “is written” refers to what is written in the Old Testament Scriptures.⁴⁹ Paul does not quote a specific text here, but Paul has quoted no less than six Old Testament texts so far in this letter (1 Cor. 1:19, 31; 2:9, 16; 3:19, 20). In each of these texts, there is a consistent theme, as Richard Hays observes:

As we have seen, the wider Old Testament context of each of these quotations reinforces the theme of divine reversal: God confounds the wise, the strong, and the prosperous and raises up the simple, the weak, and the poor. Furthermore, the two quotations in chapter 2, though they are not explicit admonitions against boasting, reinforce the same theme by juxtaposing God’s gracious ways to all human understanding. The cumulative force of these citations is unmistakable: the witness of Scripture places a strict limit on human pride and calls for trust in God alone.⁵⁰

Paul confirms this interpretation by defining his specific meaning: “that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.” Paul condemns the conceit and pride of the Corinthians that has been driving wedges between them as individuals puff themselves up against one another in sinful pride over their preferred teachers.⁵¹ Rather than being satisfied and grateful that God has given them multiple good teachers to dispense to them the mysteries of God, they have made their teachers into sources of pride and contention.⁵²

What We Have Received (1 Cor. 4:7)

To undercut their pride, Paul raises three rhetorical questions against the Corinthians’ boasting in v. 7. First, he asks “For who sees anything different in you?” Paul is not asking about general differences between the people, but about differences they believe proves their superiority over each other.⁵³ Indeed, Paul will later make much of the differences within the various members of the body of Christ, but to prove their mutual dependence, and *not* to demonstrate any particular member’s superiority (1 Cor. 12:12–31). They *are* different from each another, but not so that they should boast against each other.

Second, Paul asks, “What do you have that you did not receive?” By this, Paul acknowledges the value in their differences, while also rejecting the idea that the Corinthians brought about those differences on their own. Whatever they have of value comes from God alone.⁵⁴ The church father

⁴⁹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 70.

⁵⁰ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 69.

⁵¹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 70.

⁵² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 157–58. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.ii.html>>

⁵³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 176–77.

⁵⁴ “It is God who saved them (1:18), chose them (1:27–28), and revealed to them the hidden mysteries (2:10–12), with the result that no one may boast (1:29). God is the source of their life in Christ (1:30) and

Augustine appealed frequently to this question, observing that we have nothing by our own merit or even by our own free will, but that even our desire for Christ comes from God's free grace toward us.⁵⁵ Everything good that we have—from our faith to our works that arise as the fruit of faith—all come from God's grace and mercy toward us. Indeed, as Paul writes elsewhere, “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

Third, as a consequence of the second question, Paul asks how they can boast as though they did not receive these good gifts. Shrewdly, Paul is observing that their boasting reveals that they do not really believe that what they have received has come as a gift of God's free grace.⁵⁶ Paul himself will later insist that Christ has called him as an apostle despite his unworthiness: “But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:10).⁵⁷ Indeed, the only remedy to this kind of boastful pride is to renounce our own glory by boasting in God's glorious power and grace toward us.⁵⁸ This kind of attitude is what it would mean to avoid going beyond what is written, since Paul earlier wrote, “Therefore, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (1 Cor. 1:31).

Already (1 Cor. 4:8)

The next paragraph of Paul's letter is structured around questions of *time*. Paul begins with two emphatic uses of the word “already” (1 Cor. 4:8), and then ends with two emphatic uses of the word “now” (1 Cor. 4:11 [ESV: “present”], 13 [ESV: “still”]). Paul speaks of the prosperity that the Corinthians possess *already* ironically, while he will speak of the trials that he and the other apostles experience *now* with deadly seriousness. By using *already* ironically, Paul is rebuking the Corinthians for acting as though they already possessed the fullness of Christ's kingdom.⁵⁹ Rhetorically, Paul ratchets up the blessings of the Corinthians from being not only already satisfied, but already rich; not only already rich, but reigning.⁶⁰

Although the ESV and other versions translates this last phrase as “become kings,” it would be

activates all the spiritual gifts (12:6). God appointed the various roles in the church (12:28) and will give them the final victory over death (15:57). Everything special about them is attributable to God's calling of them.” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 137.)

⁵⁵ “Augustine, however, does not ineptly make frequent use of this declaration for maintaining, in opposition to the Pelagians, that whatever there is of excellence in mankind, is not implanted in him by nature, so that it could be ascribed either to nature or to descent; and farther, that it is not acquired by free will, so as to bring God under obligation, but flows from his pure and undeserved mercy. For there can be no doubt that Paul here contrasts the grace of God with the merit or worthiness of men.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 159. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.ii.html>>) For a list of quotations on the subject (including various citations of 1 Corinthians 4:7), see “Augustine on the New Life in Christ,” by N. R. Needham. Available online: <<https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/augustinenewlife.html>>

⁵⁶ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 101.

⁵⁷ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 71.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 160. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.ii.html>>

⁵⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 179.

⁶⁰ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 71.

better to translate this as “having begun to reign” to avoid the idea that Paul is suggesting that they are, or ever will, become independent kings.⁶¹ Notice that the exact same word is translated in the next phrase as, “And would that you *did reign*...” They will not reign as independent kings, but they nevertheless will reign—with Christ and with the apostles. Part of the error of the Corinthians, though, is that they are acting as though they have begun to reign *without* the apostles (“us”). Some have argued that the Corinthians acted this way on the basis of a very sophisticated theology, but it seems more likely to believe simply that they thoughtlessly reflected the values of the surrounding culture.⁶² As David Garland writes, “The problem, then, is not that they think that the judgment lies behind them but that they have not given any thought to God’s judgment at all.”⁶³

The greater part of their error, however, has to do not with their desire to be satisfied, rich, and reigning, but with their timeline for expecting these blessings. They expect to receive these blessings *already*, but Paul insists that this is not possible until the day of the Lord’s coming (cf. 1 Cor. 4:5). Paul also wishes that they were reigning, for that would mean that he would be reigning with them (1 Cor. 4:8)! For now, Paul must live instead in suffering, shame, and weakness. These trials are not a reflection of Paul’s failure as a disciple, but evidence that Paul is walking the same path of suffering that his Master walked in this world. For Paul, suffering and weakness “reflect the true nature of discipleship, discipleship that is consonant with his preaching of the cross.”⁶⁴

Now (1 Cor. 4:9–13)

Rather than reigning, the apostles suffer. Paul says that God has exhibited the apostles as condemned men for a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men (1 Cor. 4:9). Remember that in those days, executions happened publicly, in amphitheaters, as a public spectacle for entertainment.⁶⁵ Their service would not earn them worldly glory, but only spiritual glory that the world will neither see or appreciate. As Gordon Fee writes, “The scandal of the cross is written large over Paul’s vision of his own apostleship. For him it truly was ‘like master, like servant’ (cf. Matt. 20:26–27).”⁶⁶

⁶¹ “Despite the support of many commentators and translators, the original NIV (‘already you have become kings’) reflected a slightly skewed nuance for the verb; in Paul’s sentence it refers not to their status as kings but to their activity of reigning. This has now been corrected to ‘[already] you have begun to reign’ (cf. NAB: ‘You have launched upon your reign’; cf. NEB, Barrett). Although the difference between the two may seem slight, the point is that Paul’s language here is thoroughly eschatological and reflects his Jewish heritage, which viewed the saints as sharing the reign at the End, but not themselves as becoming kings. For Paul the long-awaited messianic kingdom had been inaugurated by the coming of Jesus. The kingdom of God is both a present reality (v. 20) and a future hope (6:9). Paul thus sees their present boasting in a spiritual status as tantamount to their supposing the final reign of God already to have begun. As with the Spirit’s giftings with which they have been enriched, so also with the kingdom of God. They have indeed entered the kingdom, of which the Spirit is the evidence. But they have not yet fully realized the End, of which the resurrection will be the evidence.” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 188–89.)

⁶² Hays, *First Corinthians*, 71.

⁶³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 138.

⁶⁴ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 188–89.

⁶⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 183.

⁶⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 191.

Paul acknowledges that the apostles appear to the world as “fools for Christ’s sake,” and, by contrast, he rebukes the Corinthians for their willingness to be considered wise “in Christ” (1 Cor. 4:10). In contrast with “for Christ’s sake,” that phrase “in Christ” does not refer to a vital union and communion with Christ, as it often means elsewhere. Lenski captures Paul’s meaning in this contrast well: “The Corinthians are not ready to forego and to lose all for him in order to gain all in him. They seek to cling to him with one hand and to the world and its wisdom with the other hand.”⁶⁷

Rather than being *already* satisfied, rich, and reigning, Paul lays out a different vision for what Christian discipleship looks like *now* in 1 Corinthians 4:11–13. Up to this *present* [lit., “now”] hour, the apostles must suffer by hunger and thirst, by nakedness, by being cuffed,⁶⁸ by being homeless, toiling hard with their own hands rather than accepting support.⁶⁹ In response to all mistreatment, they turn the other cheek (1 Cor. 4:12b–13a; cf. Matt. 5:39). They are the *scum* of the world (that is, filth that is rinsed away), and the *refuse* of all things (that is, filth that is scraped off and swept away).⁷⁰

Although the ESV places the phrase “and are *still* [lit., ‘now’]” earlier into the phrase, Paul places it at the very end as a punctuation: “until *now*.” Christians are not *already* satisfied, rich, and reigning; for *now*, we must suffer. Like our Master before us, our lives must walk the path the cross, for the cross is the only path to true, heavenly, eternal glory.⁷¹ Certainly, our Savior suffered more than we must, and the apostles also suffered uniquely because of their unique role in the church. Nevertheless, what is true for Christ and for the apostles is true for all of us: in this life, we will not enter into our glory, and we must not act as though we have. Instead, we must recognize that Christian discipleship requires taking up our cross to follow Jesus. In his commentary, Richard Hays asks an incisive question: “The image of the suffering apostle should be held clearly before our eyes, and then we should ask ourselves: Are we sure we want to belong to Christ and share his way?”⁷²

Ministers have Real Authority (1 Cor. 4:14–21)

After all this, Paul seems to sense that the Corinthians may be getting the wrong impression as to his motives for writing. So, he explains that he is not intending to cause them shame, but simply to admonish them as his beloved children (1 Cor. 4:14). That is, Paul selects yet one more metaphor to explain his relationship to the Corinthians: that of a father with his children.⁷³ The word “admonish” generally expresses “parental admonition and instruction. His design was to bring the truth to their minds, and let them see what they really were, as contrasted with what they imagined themselves to

⁶⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 184.

⁶⁸ “...not simply struck, but in an insulting manner (like slaves, 1 Pet. ii. 20, or a condemned man, Mark xiv. 65).” (Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 111.)

⁶⁹ “*Working with our own hands*. The apostle, in a subsequent chapter, proves at length his right, and that of other ministers to an adequate support from the church. But he did not avail himself of that right in Corinth, 9, 15.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 73.)

⁷⁰ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 74.

⁷¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 197–98.

⁷² Hays, *First Corinthians*, 73.

⁷³ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 199.

be.”⁷⁴ So, his goal is not to heap shame upon them, but to chastise them in fatherly affection so that they might “might learn to glory, as he did, in the abasement of the cross.”⁷⁵

Ministers are Fathers (1 Cor. 4:14–15)

In what sense, though, is Paul a father? This is especially important question in light of Jesus’ strict prohibition against calling anyone “on earth father, for you have one Father, who is in heaven” (Matt. 23:9). Paul explains the nature of his fatherly relationship to the Corinthians in two ways. First, Paul contrasts his own relationship to the Corinthians with the countless (lit., “ten thousand”) “guides” that they have (1 Cor. 4:15a). These *guides* (*paidagōgoi*) were usually slaves who had responsibility for the education of the sons in a family.⁷⁶ These slave teachers were disciplinarians who would berate the children in their care with shame, in contrast to the loving admonitions of a father.⁷⁷ As Calvin observes, “Very different is the love of a father, very different his anxiety, very different his attachment from those of a pedagogue.”⁷⁸ Importantly, Jesus did not condemn the fatherly *affection* of leaders for those under their responsibility, but only the blind *adoration* of those who insist upon the title “Father.” After forbidding his disciples from calling anyone “father” in this world, Jesus clarified his intent: “[11] The greatest among you shall be your servant. [12] Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:11–12). Paul does not claim to be their *father* in order to demand their devotion, but to remind them of his sacrificial service toward them.

Second, Paul explains *how* he became a father to the Corinthians: “For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15b). Paul is not saying that he himself brought about their new birth as Christians, but only that God used him as the means of converting the Corinthians.⁷⁹ In many ways, he is saying the same thing (albeit with a different metaphor) as earlier: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6). God alone *is* the Father of his people; however, ministers like Paul, in a limited sense, become fathers insofar as the Lord uses their efforts to draw sinners to faith in Christ. As Calvin writes, “The word, as I have said, is the spiritual seed. God alone by means of it regenerates our souls by his influence, but, at the same time, he does

⁷⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 75.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 167–68. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.iii.html>>

⁷⁶ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 75.

⁷⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 146.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 169. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.iii.html>>

⁷⁹ “There are three agencies in the conversion of men. The efficiency is in Christ by his Spirit; the administrative agency is in preachers; the instrumental in the word. What God has joined together, let not man put asunder. We cannot do without the first and the third, and ought not to attempt to do without the second. For though multitudes are converted by the Spirit through the word, without any ministerial intervention, just as grain springs up here and there without a husbandman, yet it is the ordinance of God that the harvest of souls should be gathered by workmen appointed for that purpose.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 76.)

not exclude the efforts of ministers.”⁸⁰

Ministers are Teachers (1 Cor. 4:16–17)

Paul builds on this metaphor of a *father* to describe a specific, fatherly role: *teacher*. As a teacher, Paul is not a detached academic, lecturing them from the distance of his ivory tower. Rather, Paul teaches in the most intimate manner possible: by his own example. He urges the Corinthians to imitate him (1 Cor. 4:16), although he does not mean that they should imitate him apart from Christ. Rather, his words here anticipate the fuller expression of this sentiment that he will write later in this letter: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). On the one hand, Paul insists that his teaching has been shoulder-to-shoulder, life-on-life, as Paul has poured himself into them.⁸¹ In this way, Paul urges the Corinthians to imitate the example he has personally taught and demonstrated for them. On the other hand, though, Paul is insisting that his example has limitations, so that the Corinthians should not follow anyone, “except in so far as he leads us to Christ.”⁸²

To reinforce what Paul has taught the Corinthians, he sent Timothy to them to remind the Corinthians of Paul’s “ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17). That is, Timothy’s explicit job is to reinforce the imitation of Paul’s example—the example Paul has taught wherever he has established churches.⁸³ Once again, however, these “ways” are not Paul’s quirky, idiosyncratic methods, as Lenski observes:

The Old Testament constantly uses the Hebrew equivalent for αἱ ὁδοί [“the ways”] in the objective sense: the ways that God has marked out in his Word. These divinely prescribed ways Paul had made his own, and he calls them “mine” only in this sense. Note the use of the singular in Acts 9:2; I Cor. 12:31; II Pet. 2:2, “the way of truth”; and the plural in Rev. 15:3, “righteous and true are thy ways.” The modifier “in Christ” is emphatic and important. These ways are Paul’s teachings and his church practice in union with Christ, and not one of them ever wanders away from Christ.⁸⁴

As a teacher of God’s *ways in Christ*, Paul has patiently, diligently, carefully, and thoroughly taught and preached the word by his personal example and as a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1; cf. 2 Tim. 4:2).

Ministers are Rulers (1 Cor. 4:18–21)

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 172. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.iii.html>>

⁸¹ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 80.

⁸² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 173 Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.iv.html>>

⁸³ “*For this cause*, that is, to secure your imitating my example. This end, Timothy, whom he commends as his son, and as faithful, was to accomplish by vindicating the apostle from the aspersions which had been cast upon him, by reminding the Corinthians of his conduct and teaching as a minister of Christ.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 76.)

⁸⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 198.

Even so, Paul recognizes that some in Corinth are arrogantly living and talking as though Paul were not coming back (1 Cor. 4:18). The word “arrogant” in both vv. 18 and 19 is the same word for “puffed up” in 1 Corinthians 4:6. If the Lord wills, however, Paul does intend to come back to confront these puffed up people. Specifically, he says that he wants to come to know not their *talk*, but their *power*. The word for “talk” (*logos*) is the word that Paul has used to describe the eloquent speech (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1, 13), and the same word that he used to describe his own, weak, foolish preaching (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:4). While the *talk* of the Corinthians emphasized outwardly sophisticated speech, the message of the cross was weak, fearful, and trembling (1 Cor. 2:3). Rather than being outwardly, externally impressive, Paul’s preaching relied on the power (*dynamis*) of the Spirit (1 Cor. 1:18, 24; 2:4, 5; 4:19, 20).⁸⁵

This is the paradox of the kingdom of God. Paul insists that the kingdom of God does not consist of mere speech (no matter how eloquent), but in real power (1 Cor. 4:20). In the Bible, the “kingdom of God” refers sometimes to God’s royal dominion and authority, and other times to those under that authority.⁸⁶ These two senses describe the same reality from opposite vantage points (from God’s and from ours), and, in this light, Paul is referring to *our* vantage point. For those *under* God’s royal authority, we experience the power of God through the ministry of God’s preached word.⁸⁷ This ministry is not outwardly impressive, but actually quite weak. Pastors proclaim a scandalous

⁸⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 199.

⁸⁶ “The idea expressed by the phrase ‘kingdom of God,’ in the New Testament, is very comprehensive and manifold, and therefore indefinite. The two senses under which most, if not all, its applications may be comprehended are, 1. The royal authority or dominion exercised by God or Christ; and 2. Those over whom that authority extends, or who recognize and submit to it. In the former sense, the word (βασιλεία) *kingdom* is used in such expressions as, Thy kingdom come, Of his kingdom there is no end, The sceptre of his kingdom, &c., &c. In such expressions as, To enter the kingdom of God; The children, or members of the kingdom, the phrase means the community over which God reigns, whether in this world, or in the world to come. In the former sense the meaning is equivalent to the reign of God. Hence to say, Thy kingdom come, and to say, May God reign, is the same thing. Now as God reigns in the hearts of his people—as well as in the church, and in heaven—so this inward spiritual dominion is called the kingdom of God.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 78–79.)

⁸⁷ “As the Lord governs the Church by his word, as with a scepter, the administration of the gospel is often called the kingdom of God. Here, then, we are to understand by the kingdom of God whatever tends in this direction, and is appointed for this purpose — that God may reign among us.... We have already seen that the preaching of the gospel is of such a nature, that it is inwardly replete with a kind of solid majesty. This majesty shows itself, when a minister strives by means of power rather than of speech — that is, when he does not place confidence in his own intellect, or eloquence, but, furnished with spiritual armor, consisting of zeal for maintaining the Lord’s honor — eagerness for the raising up of Christ’s kingdom — a desire to edify — the fear of the Lord — an invincible constancy — purity of conscience, and other necessary endowments, he applies himself diligently to the Lord’s work. Without this, preaching is dead, and has no strength, with whatever beauty it may be adorned. Hence in his second epistle, he says, that in Christ nothing avails but a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17) — a statement which is to the same purpose. For he would have us not rest in outward masks, but depend solely on the internal power of the Holy Spirit.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 175–76. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.iv.html>>)

fully when they preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 1:23), but King Jesus has authorized us to preach no other message. The world may reject this gospel, but to those for whom the Holy Spirit opens eyes, ears, and hearts, this gospel of Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24; 2:9). This is the power of the kingdom of God.

Paul brings this whole discussion to a point by asking, “What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor. 4:21). As a father who has patiently taught them all these years, he longs to come to them in love and in a spirit of gentleness; however, if they continue to resist the authority entrusted to him as an apostle of Jesus Christ and a minister of the gospel, he will not be able to do so.⁸⁸ Instead, he will be forced to come with a “rod.” In the context, this is an important word. In the Old Testament, God instructed fathers to discipline their children with a “rod” (Prov. 22:15; 23:13–14).⁸⁹ In the realm of a kingdom, however, the word translated as “rod” has a related, but stronger, meaning, referring to a king’s *scepter* (cf. Heb. 1:8; Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15; cf. LXX Ps. 23:4 [Gk. 22:4]; 45:6 [Gk. 44:6]; Isa. 9:4; 11:1; Ezek. 19:11; 29:6).

As a pastor to the Corinthians, Paul seeks to admonish them with fatherly affection. He has taught them tirelessly by word and example, but they are drifting from the gospel. Paul is hoping that this stern—but loving—admonition will change their minds; however, if they do not change course, Paul knows that he must shepherd them through formal processes of church discipline. Indeed, in the very next chapter he excommunicates an unrepentant sinner (1 Cor. 5:3–5). As every pastor following in Paul’s footsteps has learned, we hope to shepherd sinners to Christ through preaching, through warnings, and through admonitions, but sometimes the sheep entrusted to us wander into sin. When informal shepherding does not bring back a wandering sinner, Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd gives his undershepherds the rod of church discipline to *comfort* sinners by removing them from the danger of sin (cf. Ps. 23:4). As ministers are stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1), so also ministers are stewards of the scepter of Christ’s kingdom in the process of church discipline. That is, ministers are not rulers unto themselves, but only those who administer the rule of Christ’s kingly reign in Christ’s holy church.

John Calvin captures this pastoral dilemma well:

Observe here what system a good pastor ought to observe; for he ought of his own accord to be inclined to mildness, with the view of drawing to Christ, rather than driving. This mildness, so far as in him lies, he ought to maintain, and never have recourse to bitterness, unless he be compelled to do so. On the other hand, he must not *spare the rod*, (Proverbs 13:24,) when there is need for it, for while those that are teachable and agreeable should be dealt with mildly, sharpness requires to be used in dealing with the refractory and contumacious. We see, too, that the Word of God does not contain mere doctrine, but contains an intermixture of bitter reproofs, so as to supply pastors with a rod. For it often happens, through the obstinacy of the people, that those pastors who are naturally the mildest are constrained to put on, as it were, the countenance of another, and act with rigor and

⁸⁸ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 79.

⁸⁹ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 73.

severity.⁹⁰

Robert Murray M'Cheyne, a 19th-century Scottish Presbyterian pastor, wrote something similar about the nature of church discipline:

When I first entered upon the work of the ministry among you, I was exceedingly ignorant of the vast importance of church discipline. I thought that my great and almost only work was to pray and preach. I saw your souls to be so precious, and the time so short, that I devoted all my time, and care, and strength, to labour in word and doctrine. When cases of discipline were brought before me and the elders, I regarded them with something like abhorrence. It was a duty I shrank from; and I may truly say it nearly drove me from the work of the ministry among you altogether. But it pleased God, who teaches his servants in another way than man teaches, to bless some of the cases of discipline to the manifest and undeniable conversion of the souls of those under our care; and from that hour a new light broke in upon my mind, and I saw that if preaching be an ordinance of Christ, so is church discipline. I now feel very deeply persuaded that both are of God—that two keys are committed to us by Christ, the one the key of doctrine, by means of which we unlock the treasures of the Bible, the other the key of discipline, by which we open or shut the way to the sealing ordinances of the faith. Both are Christ's gift, and neither is to be resigned without sin.⁹¹

Paul is writing this letter to plead with the Corinthians by *doctrine* to repent; however, if they do not, he must come to them by *discipline* to bring wandering sheep back into the fold of Jesus Christ. In the next chapter, Paul will begin the process of discipline from afar.

Discussion Questions

1) Where do you seek true, lasting, genuine *enjoyment* (1 Cor. 3:21–23)? In Christ alone, or in the blessings and wisdom of this world? What about the world's wisdom seem so alluring to you? What would change if you *used* everything in this world for the *enjoyment* of Christ? What would change in your relationships? What would change in your outlook?

2) What does Paul mean by calling ministers “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1)? How do pastors uniquely administer Christ's kingdom through the key of doctrine, by declaring God's word? What does this teach us about how Christ advances his kingdom? What does this teach us about the authority (and limitations on the authority) of a pastor?

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 178. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xi.iv.html>>

⁹¹ Robert Murray M'Cheyne, *The Life and Remains, Letters, Lectures, and Poems of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne*, ed. Andrew A. Bonar (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1856), 68. Cited in Tom Ascol, “Lessons on Church Discipline,” April 13, 2011 <<https://founders.org/2011/04/13/lessons-on-church-discipline/>>. Accessed May 28, 2019.

3) In what sense is the kingdom of Christ *already* established (1 Cor. 4:8)? In what sense has the kingdom of Christ *not yet* come? What tension do we find in the *now*, between the already/not yet? Where do you feel this tension in your own life? Do you tend more to despair over the effectiveness of the *already*, or to be *deceived* into boasting about the *not yet*?

4) In what sense are ministers *fathers* (1 Cor. 4:14–15)? How should we relate to ministers in their fatherly capacity? In what sense are ministers *teachers* (1 Cor. 4:16–17)? How should we learn from ministers as they teach us? In what sense are ministers *rulers* (1 Cor. 4:18–21)? How does Christ establish the government of his kingdom through their ministry?