

FOLLOWING THE APOSTLES 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

By Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

with Ra McLaughlin

INTRODUCTION

As Paul tried to turn the Corinthians away from their quarrels and divisions, he appealed to them as their spiritual father. Many people had helped the church at Corinth, but only one person had brought them to life in Christ: Paul himself. So, he asked them to remember that they were his spiritual children, and to listen carefully to what he had to say. He hoped that their appreciation for his previous ministry in their lives would encourage them to follow his instructions.

OBLIGATIONS OF LEADERS

Before he addressed the Corinthian congregation's responsibilities toward him as an apostle, Paul focused on the obligations of Christian leaders in general. He explained their roles in the church in the light of his discussion in the previous chapter.

1. The apostle concluded (**so then**) that the Corinthians should view him and other Christian leaders in two ways. First, Christian leaders should be viewed as **servants of Christ**. The term translated "servant" often denoted a domestic servant. Such persons served others in a variety of ways, but always exalted those they served. Paul said that he and other leaders were actually little more than servants of Christ who humbly did his bidding.

Second, Paul said that Christian leaders were **stewards**. Stewards were high-ranking servants entrusted with the oversight of households. They were especially responsible for the management and distribution of household resources. Paul used this office as an analogy for church leadership because both stewarded **the secret things** ("mysteries" NRSV). The term "mysteries" describes the redemptive grace of God that had been kept secret for a long time, but had finally been revealed in Christ (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10; Rom. 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7; 15:51; Eph. 1:9; 3:3,4,9; 5:32; 6:19; Col. 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; 1 Tim. 3:9,16). This redemption is unfathomable, but God has revealed portions of it in the gospel of Christ. God commissions church leaders to bring this great treasure of revelation to the church.

2. What is required of stewards? Above all, they **must prove faithful**. The Corinthians valued eloquence and pretentious human wisdom. Paul rejected this standard for evaluating leaders. He and all other leaders should be evaluated only by the standard of fidelity to Christ, their faithfulness in handling the mysteries entrusted to them.

3. Next, Paul directly opposed the standards of leadership that the Corinthian church had endorsed. In response to their thoughts ("but with me" NRSV; "but to me" NASB), Paul said he did not care if the Corinthians or **any human court** (literally, "day") **judged** him. Because only God could know how faithful Paul had been to the mysteries God had revealed to him, only God could properly evaluate Paul's performance. Paul did not reject legitimate human criticisms with these words. Rather, he reminded his readers that there was only one authoritative judge, and that the time for judgment had not yet come. Ultimately, only God could judge him. Since fidelity to Christ was the goal of his ministry, Paul would not be satisfied with human evaluations. In fact, he reserved such a special place for Christ that he said, "**I do not even judge myself.**" Of course, he did not mean that he never evaluated his own life. Instead, he meant that he would not supplant Christ as his judge. He would never grant the ultimate authority to judge his ministry to anyone but Christ himself.

4. Paul admitted that his **conscience** was **clear**, but he did not make the mistake of concluding his innocence. It did not matter if Paul thought he was blameless, just as it did not matter if the Corinthians thought he was blameworthy. Instead, he insisted, "**It is the Lord who judges.**" Paul firmly established that judgment belongs to God alone. He did not reject the appropriate use of discernment between good and evil people, as proven by the fact that he went on to judge one of the Corinthians in the very next chapter (5:3) and to instruct the Corinthians to judge between matters within the church (5:12; 6:2). Rather, as the next verse makes clear, he spoke of the ultimate judgment of a person's life, the judgment of one's eternal destiny.

5. Paul drew a conclusion (**therefore**) from the foregoing argument. Because God restrains final judgment until the day of the Lord, Christians should **judge nothing before the appointed time**. Instead, they should **wait** for the day when Christ will expose **what is hidden**, even **the motives of men's hearts**. In many passages, Paul affirmed his belief that Jesus' return will be accompanied by a great judgment for all people (Rom. 2:2-16; 3:4-6; 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:12; 2 Tim. 4:1,8). Not only will God judge actions, but also intentions and motives (compare Heb. 4:12). As a result, at this final judgment everyone will **receive his praise from God** (see John 5:44; Rom. 2:29; 2 Tim. 4:8). God will honor those who prove faithful to Christ.

Paul mentioned these facts about future judgment so that the Corinthians would stop judging him. It seems evident from Paul's objections to the Corinthians' behavior thus far that the Corinthians largely stood against Paul, judging him to be foolish and weak. For example, in their divisions, the Corinthians not only supported Apollos or Peter (1:12; 3:4-6,22), but opposed Paul. As the rest of the chapter will show, they evidently thought him low and foolish, and they preferred human wisdom to the wisdom he preached (1 Cor. 2:1,6). Paul wanted them to stop judging him and to accept his authority as he addressed their problems.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FOLLOWERS

Paul explained the reason for the manner in which he had spoken of himself and Apollos. He desired the Corinthians to react appropriately to human leadership in the church, not by taking pride in some association with a leader, but by humbly serving others.

6. Paul began by affectionately explaining to his **brothers** (see also 1:10,11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 7:24,29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,50,58; 16:15) why he had applied to himself and Apollos the principles of service to God in positions of leadership (3:5-15; 4:1-2) and of belonging to Christ (3:21-23). Both he and Apollos had become occasions for pride among the Corinthians. The people exalted these leaders according to human wisdom and pretense. Paul offered his outlooks on leadership **so that they would not go beyond what is written**. The expression "**what is written**," like the verb "**is written**" when it stands alone, usually refers to the Old Testament Scriptures (Matt. 2:5; Luke 10:26; 20:17; 2 Cor. 4:13). Here the apostle indicated his own loyalty to the Old Testament and his interest in seeing the Corinthians live up to its guiding principles. Paul had already alluded to the Old Testament several times in the preceding context (1 Cor. 1:19,31; 2:9; 3:19). It is likely that he had these passages in mind as he wrote this instruction. In any event, if the Corinthians would live under the authority of the Scriptures, they would **not take pride in one man over against another**, damaging the fellowship by causing divisions. Such behavior belongs in the world, not in the church of Christ.

7. Paul gave yet another reason (**for**) for rejecting pride by asking three questions. 1) Who makes one person ("**you**" is singular here) in the church **different from anyone else**? The expected answer is "no one" and "nothing." Although the parties within the Corinthian church exalted themselves over each other, they really and obviously were not better than each other. 2) To prove his point Paul asked if they had anything that they had **not received**. The Corinthians had many good gifts in their church, but these gifts all came from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 1:4-7; 2:10,12-13; 7:7; 12:4-7,11,28). They had no basis for pride in their spiritual abilities because these were simply free gifts from God. 3) To drive the point home, Paul asked why the Corinthians **boast[ed] as though** they had **not** received what they possessed. Those who recognize that they have nothing apart from God's grace will never exalt themselves in pride. They will never raise themselves over others as the Corinthian factions were doing.

SARCASM

Next, Paul launched into a series of sarcastic statements. He was so confident of his criticisms against the pride of the Corinthians that he began to ridicule their practices.

8. Having reminded his readers that they had nothing in and of themselves, Paul challenged them further. He accused them of acting inappropriately in a threefold crescendo. First, they behaved as if they **already** had **all** they **want**[ed]. In other words, the Corinthian believers involved in prideful factions had so little self-awareness that they actually behaved as if they lacked nothing. They behaved as if their gifts and wisdom were perfect and complete, though these were really temporary and incomplete (13:9-12). Pride is difficult to sustain when people realize their inadequacies, but Paul saw no such humility in the Corinthian divisions.

Second, Paul chided them for acting as if they had **already become rich**. “**Rich**” probably has multiple meanings here. It may refer to the wealth of blessings that believers will receive at Christ’s return when they begin to reign with him. It may also refer to actual wealth that some Corinthians may have amassed since their conversions — the rich easily deceive themselves into pride because they fail to see their spiritual poverty (Matt. 19:24; Rev. 3:17). Or, “rich” may refer to the mature possession (1 Cor. 13:9-12) of spiritual gifts (compare 1 Cor. 1:5-7). Paul thought that those who divide the church through pretension and arrogance behaved, on the one hand, like self-assured rich people lacking humility, and, on the other, like Christians who had already received all their future blessings and wrongly took pride in them.

Third, Paul accused them of behaving as if they had already **become kings**. By this accusation, he again addressed the legitimate Christian hope for the day when believers will reign with Christ over the new earth (Rev. 20:6). The problem, however, was that the divisive members of the church acted as if they had already reached this destiny. They behaved like those who had no flaws, no weaknesses, and no need to grow (1 Cor. 13:11-12). Paul admitted his wish that this were true. If it were, then he and the other apostles (4:9) would be **kings with** the Corinthians. Such an honored state would have been glorious, but it was not yet reality. By pointing out that he and the other apostles had not yet begun to reign, and the fact that all Christians look forward to beginning their reigns simultaneously, Paul pointed out the ridiculousness of the Corinthians’ attitude. They could not take pride in reigning while at the same time disparaging Paul — if they were kings, so was he. Since they clearly would not have considered Paul a king, they had no business acting like kings themselves.

Paul intended each of these statements to point out the Corinthians’ specific boasts so that they would see themselves as Paul saw them. He wanted them to realize that they truly had no basis for their high opinions of themselves, and he wanted them therefore to abandon their arrogance, to be reconciled to one another, and to respect his authority.

9. Paul next explained (**for**) why he truly wished he already reigned as a king with the Corinthians. He and other **apostles** suffered severely for the gospel. They were like those led in public **procession** to the **arena** to die. What more humiliating description of his service could Paul offer? He felt that he had been made **a spectacle to the whole universe**. Everyone, both **angels** and **men**, watched with glee at his painful suffering and humiliation. That the apostles suffered so greatly further

emphasized to the Corinthians their error of thinking that they had already become kings (4:8).

10. To bring out the irony he saw in the Corinthians' pride, Paul contrasted his experience of suffering with their attitudes. He had been a **fool, weak, and dishonored**, but they behaved as the **wise, strong, and honored**. From the Corinthians' perspective, and from the world's, the Corinthians really were wise, strong, and honored, while Paul was foolish, weak, and dishonored. But Paul's argument earlier in the letter made it clear that God did not share such worldly perspectives. God's weakness conquered the world's strength, and his foolishness defeated the world's wisdom (1:18-25). Paul pointed to these contrasts to bring reality to bear on their situation. How could they feel one way about themselves when the apostles of Christ felt oppositely about themselves? In good conscience, they could not. Their wisdom, strength, and honor stood only according to worldly principles that God did not recognize. If the Corinthians wanted true strength, wisdom, and honor, they would have to seek it by being weak, foolish and dishonored like Paul.

This verse furthers Paul's argument by turning the tables on the Corinthians' self-esteem. They needed to repent of the very things in which they took pride, while those things they despised in Paul made him more worthy of their respect. They had no basis for their pride, and thus no basis for their divisions. In order truly to gain the things they thought they already had, they would have to become the kind of people who would have no reason to divide into factions.

11-13. Next, Paul digressed to describe his apostolic experience even further. He and other apostles suffered terrible times to that **very hour** (4:11) and **moment** (4:13). The list of experiences in 4:11 is striking: 1) **hungry and thirsty** (compare 2 Cor. 11:27); 2) **in rags**; 3) **brutally treated** (compare Acts 16:37; 2 Cor. 11:23-25); and 4) **homeless**. In 4:12-13 Paul indicated that he and other apostles **work[ed] with their own hands** (see Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 9:6; 2 Thess. 3:8), **bless[ed] ... when cursed** (see Luke 6:28; Rom. 12:14), **endure[d] ... when persecuted** (see Matt. 5:10-12,44; Rom. 12:14; 2 Cor. 12:10; 2 Thess. 1:4; 2 Tim. 3:11-12), and **answer[ed] kindly ... when slandered** (see Prov. 15:1; 1 Pet. 2:12,23; 3:16). Paul then summarized his condition as **the scum of the earth** and **the refuse of the world**. The apostles did not make the mistake that the Corinthians had made about themselves. They did not behave as those who had already received their rewards. They could not because their lives were so terrible.

In the course of Paul's argument, this section points out that the apostles themselves — the very people over whom the Corinthians divided — did not live up to the Corinthians' boasts. Did the Corinthians feel superior because they followed Peter? Peter was persecuted, and rejoiced in his suffering (Acts 5:41). Did they follow Jesus? His suffering exceeded that of every apostle (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; Mark 8:31; 9:12; Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:15; 24:26,46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23). They could not rightly claim to follow these leaders and also claim to be above suffering and persecution as a result.

PAUL'S PURPOSE AS A SPIRITUAL FATHER

Paul expressed his purpose in raising the matter of his own suffering for Christ. He mentioned these things to make the Corinthians aware of how inappropriate their pride and self-assurance were.

14. It would have been easy to misunderstand Paul's intentions here. He did not engage in sarcasm and mention his trials as an apostle **to shame** the Corinthians. Without a doubt sensitive readers at Corinth would have been put to shame by the contrast between Paul's humility and their own pride. Yet, Paul's goal was not to shame them, but **to warn** them or "admonish" (NASB, NRSV) them. That is, though he intended to shame them to some degree (compare 6:5; 15:34), their shame was not his ultimate goal. He did not just want them to feel badly, but to change their behavior. He employed shame as a tool for admonishing them, as a tool by which he could inspire them to reject their pride and repair their divisions. Paul purposed to help the Corinthian church imitate his own life, and thereby to help them avoid the devastating consequences of the sin in their church. Love, not anger at the Corinthians' mistreatment of one another and rejection of his authority, motivated Paul to do this. He cared for the Corinthians as his **dear children**, and this affection guided his words.

15. Paul was justified in calling himself the father of the Corinthians. Potentially, they may have had **ten thousand guardians** who were various leaders and teachers in the Christian church. Nevertheless, they had only one spiritual **father**. Paul had become their father when he had first brought them to faith in Christ through the preaching of **the gospel**. By this metaphor, Paul reminded them of several things. First, he reminded them of his authority over them, just as a father's over his children. Many Corinthians had rejected Paul's authority, but the fact that he had brought them to faith established that God approved of Paul's ministry even if many Corinthians no longer did. Second, Paul implicitly reminded the Corinthians that as a father provides an example for his children, so he had provided an example for them (a point he was to raise explicitly in verse 16). Third, he implied a sense of their obligation to obey him. Because he had brought them the gospel, they basically owed him their lives (compare Philem. 19).

16. On the basis of (**therefore**) his fatherly role in the Corinthian church, Paul urged his readers **to imitate** him. Just as children are instructed to follow the example of their fathers, Paul instructed the believers at Corinth to imitate him. He told others to imitate him as well (1 Cor. 11:1; Gal. 4:12; Phil. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:7,9). Here he was concerned that they follow his example in the ways he had just described. He was a man of humble spirit as he served as Christ's apostle, and he encouraged the Corinthians to forsake their pride and to gain the same kind of humility.

17. As a practical expression of his fatherly love (**for this reason**), Paul planned to send (or had already sent — compare NASB, NRSV) **Timothy**, perhaps along with this letter. Paul loved Timothy as his **dear son** (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2) and trusted him in the work of ministry (Acts 17:15; Phil. 2:22; 1 Thess. 3:1-3). So, Paul commended

Timothy to the Corinthian believers as a man who was **faithful in the Lord**. Timothy had proven himself to be a loyal follower of Christ and a reliable leader of the church. Paul assured his readers that Timothy could be trusted to **remind** them of Paul's **way of life in Christ Jesus**. That is, Timothy would tell them more of the sufferings and faithful service Paul had rendered as an apostle (see 4:9-13), and of Paul's way of life when he had been in Corinth previously (2:1-4; 3:6; 9:11-12), both of which Paul would have the Corinthians imitate. Timothy's efforts would be reliable because **he agree[d] with what** Paul taught **in every church** — he would not vary from the apostle's true teachings. Paul sent Timothy as an act of love in the hope that the younger minister would be able to facilitate the restoration of the Corinthian fellowship.

PAUL'S UPCOMING VISIT

Paul rounded off his discussion of the divisions in the Corinthian church by reaffirming his intention to visit. He warned those who had opposed him that his visit would prove who was right.

18-19a. Paul worried that **some** of his readers had become **arrogant**, thinking that he would never return to Corinth. In Paul's absence these members of the church had become very bold and confident in their stances. Probably, they opposed Paul and his teaching, and had grown confident in their opposition, assuming that Paul would never return to challenge their opposition.

Even so, Paul warned them that he would **come very soon**. He intended to visit Corinth as soon as possible. Paul frequently revealed his keen desire to visit the churches of Christ throughout the world (Rom. 1:10; 2 Cor. 1:15-16; Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:18). This should have encouraged his opposition to rethink their attitudes and to correct their behavior, or else to prepare themselves to deal with one imbued not with mere words, but with power (1 Cor. 2:4; 4:19-29; 5:4). Although some people in the church did not believe it, Paul was determined to come to Corinth. Still, he rightly admitted that his desire was not ultimately the determining factor in his travel plans. He qualified his intention by saying, "**If the Lord is willing**" (compare Jas. 4:15). Paul planned to spend the winter in Corinth after traveling through Macedonia (1 Cor. 16:5-7).

19b-20. Paul explained that upon his arrival he would find out two things. First, he would investigate **how these arrogant people were talking**. In other words, he would find out for himself exactly what they were saying. Yet, this was not all that interested Paul. He also wanted to know **what power** they had. He wanted to see if these proud leaders of the church who oppose him had the gifts and demonstrations of the Holy Spirit to back up their theological claims. He wanted to demonstrate to them that their "gospel" lacked the power to mend lives and create unity. Paul mentioned the power of God on a number of occasions, having in mind God's works in the church (1:18,24; 2:4-5; 5:4; 6:14; 15:43).

The apostle then gave the reason (**for**) for his focus on the power of the Spirit in his opponents. The **kingdom of God** does not consist of **talk**, no matter how sophisticated or eloquent. Rather, it consists of **power**. Put simply, Paul said, “Talk is cheap.” Anyone can use words to persuade the naive. Paul, however, would expose his opponents by showing that their ministries failed to display the work of the Holy Spirit.

21. Paul had spoken rather forcefully to the Corinthians. Here he closed this section with a pointed question: In coming to visit and test his readers, how should he treat them? Should he come like Jesus cleansing the temple (Matt. 21:12; Mark 11:15; John 2:15), **with a whip** to drive out his opponents who refused to change their ways? Or, should he come to them with **love and with a gentle spirit**, the Corinthians having heeded his warnings and changed their ways? If the Corinthians continued to follow human pride by dividing the church into factions, Paul would rebuke them harshly on his arrival. If they recommitted themselves to the true humility that comes from the gospel, he would come peacefully. Paul offered this choice in the hope that they would choose the latter.

APPLICATION

As Paul's thoughts develop in this chapter, we find many truths that are applicable to leaders and all Christians today. We will name just a few.

First, Paul puts leadership into perspective by reminding us that Christian leaders are really servants of Christ. Their teaching, if they are faithful, is Christ's teaching, and Christ receives the credit for the good they do. Leaders have the responsibility to preserve the truth of the gospel faithfully, and to love their flocks as their own children. They should be honored that Christ entrusts them with so much, and yet they should remain humble.

Along these same lines, Christian leaders should not fear opposition from the boastful and arrogant members of their churches. Instead, they may rest in the knowledge that Christ alone will judge them. Their eternal destinies will not be determined by contentious rivals, but by their Lord. By extension, this also applies to all other Christians.

Second, we need to remember that our clear consciences don't prove our innocence. We may be sincere in our views on a matter, but sincerely wrong. Like Paul, we should remain submissive to the Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testaments. We must not exceed them by trying to pry into God's hidden counsel, by pitting our wisdom against his, or by boasting in ourselves rather than in the Lord. This means that we should remember that our spiritual gifts are just that — gifts. We did not earn them or create them, but the Holy Spirit graciously bestowed them on us for his own purposes. We should thankfully appreciate our gifts, and endeavor to use them to further the gospel and to minister to the church.

Third, we need to recognize that the fact that we possess spiritual gifts does not mean that we have no more growing to do, nor does it mean that the kingdom of God has arrived in full. We should not imagine that we already have all the blessings of the kingdom. Some would try to convince us otherwise, insisting that all the gifts are ours in full, and that if we have enough faith we can utilize them perfectly. But we need to trust Paul when he says that we do not already have all we want. We have not become quite that rich, and we have not yet begun to reign with Christ in glory. Certainly, we look forward to the day when we will be able to say these things, and we hope for its speedy arrival, but we need to recognize that we are not there yet.

For the time being, we should imitate Paul's example, not only by trusting in the future fulfillment of all our hopes, but by being content to be considered weak, foolish, and dishonorable by the world as we trust in God's wisdom, strength, and honor. We must display Christ's character by blessing those who curse us, and kindly answering those who slander us. As if this weren't enough, we must actually be willing to endure persecution for the sake of the gospel, even if it entails being beaten, starving, or wandering homelessly.

As we think about these things, we may find it easy to think that we would hold up well under persecution as long as we knew that we were suffering for the gospel. But how many of us can honestly say that we would be willing to leave behind the safety and comfort of our homes to risk our lives in a foreign land preaching the gospel? How many of us, if we survived beatings and imprisonment, even stoning, would keep returning to the mission field?

Paul did not mean to shame the Corinthians into joining him in life-threatening missions, so we should not feel shamed into doing them either. But we should learn from Paul's life to meet whatever persecutions come our way — which are probably fairly insignificant for the most part — with a Christlike attitude. Unlike the Corinthians, we should not take pride in the lack of persecution we encounter, as if we were somehow above it because of the strength of our faith. Rather, we should thankfully receive the blessings we now enjoy, remembering that they are mere foretastes of the riches we will receive when Christ returns in glory.

Fourth, Christian leaders who apply what Paul teaches here to their lives should receive due respect from those who follow them. Christian leadership is at the heart a matter of service, not of power. As a result, regard for leaders in the church should be offered only to those who have proven their humble service to the church. Paul did this by suffering for the sake of the gospel. Leaders today should be ready for similar sufferings in their lives. Only then will we be able to engender a proper respect for our leadership.

DIGGING DEEPER

Judge (4:3-5)

The words Paul used for “judge,” *anakrino* (4:3-4) and *krino* (4:5), have broad potential ranges of meaning. It is probably best not to make too much of their differences in the context of 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 because Paul appears to have used them synonymously here. If he intended any difference between them, *anakrino* may have meant “examine” (compare 1 Cor. 4:3-4; 9:3; 10:25,27) and *krino* “render judgment,” but this is rather speculative because Paul also used *anakrino* in 1 Corinthians to mean “discern” (2:14-15) and “convict or call to account” (14:24).

What is written (4:6)

Not only does the phrase “what is written” (*ha gegrapta*) generally refer to Old Testament Scripture (Matt. 2:5; Luke 10:26; 20:17; 2 Cor. 4:13), but so does the verb on its own (*gegraptai*) (Rom. 1:17; 2:24; 3:4,10; 4:17; 8:36; 9:13,33; 10:15; 11:26; 12:19; 14:11; 15:3,9,21; 1 Cor. 1:19,31; 2:9; 3:19; 9:9; 10:7; 14:21; 15:45; 2 Cor. 8:15; 9:9; Gal. 3:10,13; 4:22,27).

Become kings (4:8)

Basileuo, translated “become kings,” may also mean “reign.” The Bible’s hope is not that we will all become kings, but rather that one Davidic king will reign over the restored community of the people of God (Ezek. 37:22; Luke 1:33). The New Testament also makes clear that believers will share in Christ’s reign (Rom. 5:17; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:6), but Christ’s reign will still be preeminent. Thus, it seems better to translate *basileuo* as “reign” rather than “become king” in this particular instance.

Kingdom of God (4:20)

“The kingdom of God” is also known as “the kingdom of heaven,” “the kingdom of Christ,” and “the kingdom of the Lord.” It seems first to have taken the form “the kingdom of the Lord” in the post-exilic restoration literature of Chronicles, and to have been used as a term for the restored community of the people of God under the Davidide (1 Chr. 28:5; 2 Chr. 13:8). The New Testament authors greatly expanded the term’s use, making it a central motif — arguably the central motif — in their theology. In fact, the gospel itself is frequently called “the gospel of the kingdom” or the “good news of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; Mark 1:15; Luke 16:16). In bringing the kingdom of God, Jesus began to fulfill the restoration promises of the Old Testament. He inaugurated the kingdom during his first coming, it continues now in his physical absence, and it awaits its final consummation at his return. Thus, just as the gospel writers, Paul spoke of it as both a present reality (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 4:11) and a future hope (1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5).

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. What obligations do Christian leaders face? To whom are they accountable? Can modern Christian leaders claim the same autonomy and authority that Paul claimed? What type of authority do your church leaders claim?
2. Under what conditions may Christians judge one another? What types of judgments may they render? How will Christians participate, if at all, in the final judgment?
3. Was Paul's leadership role any different than Apollos'? If so, how? Was Apollos an apostle? If so, how was his apostleship like and/or unlike Paul's?
4. How should Christians think of spiritual gifts? How much credit should Christians take for the right and beneficial use of their gifts?
5. Why are some Christians poor? Why are some Christians unhealthy? Why must Christians suffer persecution?
6. In your own life, how often are you persecuted? How often are you beaten? Slandered? Cursed? When these things happen, do you respond in kindness and humility, or do you respond in kind? Are you ashamed when you are mistreated or suffer? Why or why not?
7. How willing are you to let the world consider you the "scum of the earth" for the sake of the gospel? How willing are you to risk embarrassment by sharing the gospel with a stranger?
8. Why did Paul not fear a confrontation with those who opposed him? How did his view of the kingdom of God impact his confidence? What was Paul's view of the kingdom of God?
9. How does this chapter function as a conclusion to the first three chapters? Does this seem like a climactic conclusion, or an anti-climactic conclusion? Why? Do you think Paul intended his conclusion to be climactic, anti-climactic, or something else? Why?
10. Why do you suppose Paul spent four whole chapters on this subject? Why do you think it was the first major subject he tackled in this letter? Do you expect the first four chapters to be foundational to Paul's arguments throughout the letter? Why or why not? How will the first four chapters affect the way you read the rest of the letter?