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**GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS**

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**SPIRITUAL FATHERHOOD  
 1 CORINTHIANS 4:14-21**

**INTRODUCTION**

Paul continues to reestablish his apostolic authority among the church he founded in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 1:1, Paul reintroduces himself as *Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God*. Now he reminds the Corinthians that as the founding Apostle of the Corinthian church, he is also their spiritual *father*. He writes, *14I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 15For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel*. Paul is a true pastor, one commissioned by Jesus to proclaim the gospel that brings about new birth. Having preached the life-giving gospel, Paul confirmed his fatherhood by serving the Corinthians as he accepted responsibility for their spiritual wellbeing. Having accepted this responsibility, Paul must admonish the Corinthians as a father would correct his children. The Corinthians have many who claim to be their teachers [*tutors in Christ*], but only one *father through the gospel*.

Paul's desire was to serve the Corinthians. He did not seek authority by lording his apostleship over them. He previously illustrated the nature of his ministry, versus the ministry of false apostles, when he wrote *9For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. 10We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. 11To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; 12and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; 13when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now (1 Corinthians 4:9-13)*. Paul knew that God increasingly gives authority to the one who serves others as he takes responsibility for them. This principle is most clearly demonstrated by Jesus as He willingly took responsibility for the sins of His people. Jesus served us by accepting the punishment that we rightfully earned.

Using Jesus as his model, Paul served the Corinthians not only as an Apostle, but as a caring father. The Corinthian believers were his children resulting from the gospel and Paul knew this fact produced a unique relationship between him and the church. They are in Christ due to the new birth which the Spirit-enabled proclamation of the gospel produces. Now maturity is needed and children mature best under the guidance of a godly father. Paul has served well, but now he identifies a few additional ways that he gladly assumes responsibility for the church and brings them to maturity.

**1. AS THEIR SPIRITUAL FATHER, PAUL SETS AN EXAMPLE FOR THE CORINTHIANS (4:16)**

The place of father is a position of authority and influence. Actually, as one author has written, it is a position of *inescapable leadership*. Those to whom God entrusts this kind of authority will leave

their mark on those who are required to submit to that authority. A father, whether ecclesiastical or familial, should not underestimate his influence. He may be a poor example, but an example none the less. This is why Moses warns us, *behold, you have sinned against the LORD, and be sure your sin will find you out* (Numbers 32:23). Oftentimes, our sins will manifest themselves to the world through our children.

But Paul would not claim to be a perfect example [Romans 7:14-25]. This is why this passage, as well as all Paul's writings, are saturated with the gospel [1 Corinthians 1:30-31; 2:1-5]. One of Paul's most used phrases is *in Christ*. This is Paul's central theme: we must be those who are in Christ and walk in Christ's ways. Paul never holds himself up as the supreme example to be followed, but every true spiritual father must be able to say *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ* (1 Corinthians 11:1).

## **2. AS THEIR SPIRITUAL FATHER, PAUL TEACHES AND REMINDS THE CORINTHIANS OF THE WAYS OF CHRIST (4:17)**

Paul knows that a spiritual father must not only model the way of Christ, but he must teach it as well. Doug Wilson writes, *A man may not be a vocational theologian, but in his home he must be the resident theologian*. Later in this same letter, Paul will say, *34The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. 35If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church* (1 Corinthians 14:34-35). Spiritual fathers must be able to answer theological questions for those under their authority. So we must work at learning and communicating spiritual truth. Paul was a teaching-pastor, *just as I teach everywhere in every church*. A pastor can only live so long off of charisma and yelling. In the end, he had better know the Scriptures and be able to model and teach them with precision.

But modeling and teaching are not enough. Paul had done that well and the Corinthians were still in a mess. Therefore, Paul sends Timothy to *remind you of my ways which are in Christ*. Planned repetition is necessary for sanctification. There are certain truths that we only learn by repetition. *4"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! 5"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6"These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. 7"You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. 8"You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. 9"You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). This is the same reason we are to observe the Lord's Table *often*. [See also Romans 15:14-16; 2 Timothy 2:13-15; 2 Peter 1:11-13; 2 Peter 3:1-2]. This reminds us of the diligence spiritual fatherhood requires. We must model, teach and then teach again and again.

## **3. AS THEIR SPIRITUAL FATHER, PAUL PATIENTLY CORRECTS THE CORINTHIANS (4:18-21)**

In every family discipline is necessary. We will see this play out in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 5. Perhaps the Corinthians assumed Paul sent Timothy because he was fearful of coming to Corinth himself. Paul corrects their thinking when he says, *18Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. 19But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power. 20For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power. 21What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?* Paul knew that certain teachers had arisen in an attempt to discredit him. He is not interested in their

words; rather, he is interested in how the power of God flows through them to produce cross-centered disciples who walk in the way of Christ. This is the acid test for the man who claims to be a spiritual leader - do those under his authority walk in the ways of Christ? Does his godly character reproduce itself in future generations?

Now the only question that remains is, *21What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?* Paul desires that this letter be enough to set the Corinthians right. But if necessary, he will come with a rod of discipline. He must speak for Christ and this means confronting their sin. He prefers not to have to come in that manner, but he will if necessary.

### **CONCLUSION**

Concerning verse 21, Gordon Fee writes, *The changes of tone in this passage reveal some of the real tensions that continue to exist in Christian ministry. How to be prophetic without being harsh or implying that one is above the sins of others. How to get people to change their behavior to conform to the gospel when they think too highly of themselves. There is no easy answer, as this passage reveals. But one called to minister in the church must ever strive to do it; calling people to repentance is part of the task.* I acutely feel these tensions in my own life and ministry. So let me point us to Christ as our substitute, propitiation and intercessor. The gospel is for failing pastors, fathers and their foolish children.