

1 Corinthians 4

Written by K B Napier
Monday, 08 August 2016 09:13

“...not in word, but in power...”

Over the years I have received countless threats, inuendos and physical attacks because of my faith and witness. In response, those whose ‘faith’ is quiet and is left without threat, comment that I am ‘obviously’ doing something wrong and that I ‘must’ be reaping the dubious rewards of being apostate or otherwise outside of God’s will, so I should just ‘shut up’.

In this chapter we read of Paul’s own life, full of attacks and personal injuries! Does this mean he, too, was outside of God’s will, or that his ministry was full of error? It is a fact that any Christian who is truly witnessing will be under attack at some time in his or her life. If not, their witness should be under scrutiny as being fruitless.

The reason true Christians are attacked or scorned is that Satan cannot stand godliness, no matter how flawed a Christian is. He will mobilise otherwise ‘nice’ people – including professing Christians – to wreak havoc or to throw untruths upon sincere and faithful servants. At times the one being attacked is alone without friend or human support, though kept in the hand of Almighty God.

For Paul there is no such thing as a silent Christian. Christians are conscripted people. They belong to an army, not to a society of gentlefolk who remain safe in their armchairs! They must be clad in the armour of God, always ready to fight the good fight, and ready to receive injury and even death on behalf of their God. Most will only receive mild verbal opposition, but it does not matter. What matters is the willingness and readiness to stand alongside the Master and General of our souls, Jesus Christ, as He leads us onward, cutting a path through the evil of this world and its worldly inhabitants, who are led by Satan, their father.

In particular, pastors must be faithful stewards. This includes doing battle when it is required. Sadly, many pastors today are unused to battle! They hide behind demure facades, inwardly loathing those who cause them disquiet or who challenge their sedate lifestyles.

Too many enjoy their positions on the couch, lazing when they ought to fight. They fear the loss of status and acceptance amongst their peers, more than they fear God. Thus, they remain within the boundaries set by those peers, never casting caution aside to join the Master in a much wider scenario, where they can be called upon to lose their status and standing, and

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possibly receive many injuries to both person and position.

Do not be puffed up with your own pride or deflated by fear of men. Dress in the armour of God and fight to the last. Lose all to gain all! 'Why dost thou glory?', oh pastor, when everything you are and everything you do is from God.

Paul was speaking to the Corinthians, but we can easily apply what he said to huge numbers of pastors today: "Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings...". A pastor must always be at the front of the battle, not at the back with the baggage. He must stand and do his duty at all times. Let us all be in a state of readiness and awareness so that when battle comes we will not run away afraid.

Verse 1

1.

"Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God."

Paraphrase:

'Let men think of us as being servants of the Messiah and overseers of the secret will of God.'

It is true that certain scriptural things are not known to us, even after much examination. In a sense, then, they are 'mysterious'. But the 'mysteries' spoken of in this chapter are *not* a mystery to Believers, as we shall discover. The very fact that 'us' are 'servants... and overseers' of these things is sufficient to tell us that what we/'us' oversee must be known - because one cannot oversee something that is not known!

Certain mysteries (the 'secret will of God') may, or may not, be made manifest to us. What is revealed to us is entirely up to God's discretion and no matter how much we probe, or for how long, we will never, ever come to know what God is ***not*** willing to reveal. In this particular

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chapter, however, some aspects of God's secret will are made known - but only to those of us who are saved. In later chapters we come across problematic texts, but this chapter is fairly clear in its purpose and meaning.

Verses 2-4

1.

“Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.

2.

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self.

3.

For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.”

Paraphrase:

‘Beside being overseers, when examined, ministers must be found to be trusty, relied upon to do whatever God requires.

However, I am not at all concerned at being examined by you, or any other man, for I know my own heart and know that what I say and do is acceptable to God. Therefore, only He can judge me.’

It is not enough that a pastor or ‘steward’ oversees the will of God on this earth. It is ‘required’, **z eteo**, that he is also himself examined thoroughly to see if his life and beliefs are true. This is not just a desired thing, it is *demande*d of them. Any minister who thinks he is above such examination (by anyone) must think again,

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for the provision is found here, in scripture. Too many think they can act and think as they wish, when such freedom is not theirs to take.

Only when they are *proven*, after examination, to be faithful (trustworthy) can they say, with Paul, 'I do not care if you judge me, for your examination of my life will reveal only good'. To pass this test, the steward must believe, be true and sure, totally trustworthy and consistent in everything said and done; he must trust God's promises explicitly and be fully convinced of the truth of all of God's word, particularly concerning the fact of Christ's salvation in Himself and His being raised from the dead, etc.

Men who do not believe these facts of the Gospel exactly as they are given in scripture, are not men of God. There is no room for 'my belief is this...' - it is either scripture or it is not. Men who preach and teach outside of this framework are not to be trusted and are not faithful stewards. They are not, then, called by God to do His work and should not be treated as pastors. This can be applied to any who try to usurp scripture, from any and all denominations, or none.

Because he is faithful, Paul cares nothing for the examination of men into his life. He knew they would find nothing to charge him with. He did not even examine himself, partly because he knew he was doing God's will and partly because he was not in a position to wholly examine himself... that was up to God, Who can see all things in a man's heart and mind.

I am not conscious, says Paul, of anything amiss in my life. I am justified, he adds, *dikaioo*, free of wrongdoing and righteous before God, Who 'judgeth me'. It is He Who examines me, sifts through my life, heart and mind as a judge in a court, where one is either guilty or not guilty. There can be no higher judge, for God is the law-giver.

Verses 5 & 6

1.

"Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise of God.

2.

And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your

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sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another.”

Paraphrase:

‘Therefore, condemn no-one before Christ comes again, when He will show who is of evil and who is genuine. Only then can the genuine be praised, by God.

But, for now, both Apollos and I refuse to judge as men, so that none of you can justly be puffed up by your own supposed importance, making out that you are better than others.’

Though Paul knew his life was as God wanted it to be, and he had been taught directly by the risen Christ, he did not make a point of this authentic position that he held. Instead, he told his readers to cast off any status they thought they had.

He was telling them that if he, who could honestly boast of his unique office, refused to make himself higher in the eyes of men, then those in Corinth should follow his example. He says that Apollos was party to his statement, and this shows us that Apollos knew of the problem and approved of Paul’s approach.

This statement by Paul was especially aimed at the way in which so many of us try to guess the inward reasoning of men. We attribute to them this or that motivation when, as mere men, we cannot do so. How can we truly know what another is thinking or believing, unless he himself tells us, or shows it by his actions?

Paul is saying that we have no right to guess the motives of another: this must be left up to God when Christ comes again. Yes, we can judge motives that are expressed or that are displayed in actual outward expressions e.g. preaching, writing, etc. But, we cannot judge the secret will of men and women. Only God can do that.

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This is important in the life of any local church. If we dared to judge our fellow members by what we *think* is their motives, then each one of us would be cast out of fellowship! Perhaps it is not beyond us to suggest that judging the motives of others and applying strictures to them on the basis of what we *think* they are inwardly thinking, is very close to being fascist in our approach. In much the same way as police who cannot arrest a man for what he *might* do, so Christians cannot judge men for what they *think* the other is thinking. It is true of every Christian that we all think wrongly at times. But, by the grace of God we can change. We are all guilty of inward sin, but only God can deal with that.

Paul says that searching the inward motives of men is God's prerogative, not ours. It is God Who will "bring to light the hidden things of darkness". That is, only He can shine the light of His truth into the heart and discover if there is any ungodliness or immorality there.

When reading this scripture we should understand that 'darkness' in this text is **skotos**. It does not mean the transient sins we all commit every day, but speaks of sin that holds prominence in the heart and actions of another. Thus, if we dare to judge the motives of another we are really saying that his or her heart is blackened fully by sin, or a particular sin that causes them to commit the same vile acts daily.

Dare we do this? I think not! Those who ascribe to other Believers motives that are guessed-at, are thereby taking the place of God. Thus, in telling others what their 'secret' sin is, the accusers sin themselves and are full of pride.

How can we charge others of secret motives when we have our own secrets to hide? How can we charge others with sin when every sin is equal in God's eyes? Even if our suppositions concerning another are correct, the very fact that we bring charges for something that is not made known by the offending person (if, that is, he offends at all), is tantamount to taking the place of God. Which sin is greater? The unexpressed sin that lives only in the mind of the accuser, or the sin of the one making the accusation?

Note that even if a secret motive does exist in the heart of a Believer, it is NOT the duty of another Christian to bring a charge against him. This must be left until Judgement Day, when

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God will reveal the sin in the person. And remember that the sin must be prevalent, all-pervasive in the life. In other words, sin that is the sign of an unsaved man.

I repeat, dare we bring such an accusation, when all we have to go on is our own presupposition about a person when he or she has not made known such sin? We can judge what a man does, but not how he secretly thinks. And there is no way to prove if he thinks as we say he does. Why, then, sin yourself, by coming to a conclusion that may not be true? If Paul does not do so, why should you? Take care!

Verses 7-13

1.

“For who maketh thee to differ from another and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?”

2.

Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you.

3.

For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men.

4.

We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised.

5.

Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace;

6.

And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it:

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7.

Being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day.”

Paraphrase:

‘What makes you so different when it is God Who gives His gifts and abilities to everyone? How can any of you boast?’

You teachers at Corinth boast in your gifts and think you have reached the very top of your little kingdom that is the local Church! How I wish we apostles were there with you!

But, we apostles have no such glory, because we were elected to die for Christ and to look like idiots to both men and heaven.

Yes, we are made to look like fools for the sake of Christ, whilst you at Corinth are more wise than us. You are much stronger than us, for we are weak. We are despicable whilst you are honoured.

Right now we are hungry and thirsty, without clothing or place to live, afflicted by many attacks on our persons. We work hard for a living. We are put down yet we bless those who attack us.

Though attacked we bear it without complaint.

When we are treated badly we praise God, though in men’s eyes we are scum.’

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Paul is telling his readers at Corinth to climb down from their self-built pedestals. This is the danger that all preachers and pastors face – self-praise. Vast numbers of them accept praise from men without once attempting to say that any praise is due to Christ, not to them. If they are great men, great preachers, and have great results, they accept praise as though they were the causes of the gifts and results.

This ought not to be so, for their gifts are apportioned by God Himself. If some are great preachers or pastors, it is because that is how God elected them to be. They are merely doing His bidding. So, how can they possibly boast or accept praise? Yet, that is exactly what happens in many of the churches in this world. It can occur quietly and without fuss, slowly and imperceptibly. It creeps up on even the most humble of God's servants. That is why there is nothing like persecution to bring down a man's self-perception of his power and gifts!

It does not matter if the praise comes only from others; it is up to the preacher or pastor to deflect such praise and to make sure it goes to Christ. This is not false humility, it is a fact of life for any pastor or preacher, indeed, for any Christian. God says He gives His gifts and abilities personally to every saved man and woman. Because they are given individually, each has a different calling and level of spiritual ability. The charismatic idea of getting 'more' is sinful nonsense.

It does not follow that greater gifts are given to those with higher status or intelligence. The lowest-status man in a local church might be given the gift of fine oratory or theological understanding, whereas he who is naturally intelligent and with worldly status has gifts that are less public or 'great'.

This is because it is God Who brings about His will, not us. We are only instruments used to effect His purposes. We cannot rise up to the heights of God, so if we reap vast benefits or give them to others, it is all God's doing. We must each work with whatever portion of spiritual benefit we have been given by God.

Because we each have our spiritual 'ceiling' fixed by God, none of us can ever exceed or rise above that 'ceiling'. When we all work according to what God has given us, then we all reach the position of praise from God, for we have complied with what He wishes us to do. And no matter how well people of this world think we have done, they must never praise us as men and

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women for doing God's bidding.

Friends, do not praise other men for doing what God has given them to do. They are only servants of the Most High God. Reserve your praise for God Himself. We can be thankful for other men who are faithful and must support them with our prayers, but should not praise them before we praise the Lord.

When Paul says "ye are full... rich... kings..." he is being humorous, not factual! He is, in a sense, joking. The Corinthians thought they had 'made it' to the top of their local pile, and enjoyed the praises of other Christians. They revelled in their new-found positions of power, much as though they were kings. Paul is about to bring them crashing down again! He says wistfully, 'Oh, how I wish I and the other apostles had reached such a pinnacle of success and spiritual height!'

Can you see that he is showing the Corinthians how farcical was the position they thought they held? He as an apostle was suffering greatly for Christ's sake, and yet here were the Corinthians lording it over others and accruing greatness for themselves. How could they possibly lord it when everything they might be spiritually was given to them by God? No man has a natural ability to reach dizzy spiritual heights. If he reaches such heights it is only because God has given him the ability to do so, and only so as to bring benefits to the whole church, not to himself.

So, Paul's real statement was more like this: *'We apostles are being reviled by society, yet you are pretending to know it all and love the praise of your fellows! If we, as apostles, do not know it all and are not praised, why should you make yourselves out to be greater than us?'*

The apostles, Paul says, think they have been set up as lower beings, because they are constantly being attacked and know nothing but the hatred of men. They might even die for their preaching. To the world they appeared to be stupid fools... fool's for Christ's sake, yet the Corinthians, through pride, thought they themselves were wiser, stronger and more honourable than the apostles, who were sent out directly by Jesus Christ with special gifts and roles. The apostles endured many privations and sufferings for Christ's sake, yet the Corinthians led lives of splendour and relative safety. Thinking themselves to 'be something'. I know Christians like this today!

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Many of the Corinthian Believers were rich and had high positions within society, yet here were the apostles labouring at manual skills to earn living money. Paul as a tent-maker, Peter and others as fishermen, and so on. On top of that they gave every waking hour to the cause of Christ, reaping hatred and not praise from men. Far from it; they were despised and considered to be as filth, ***perikatherma*** – the refuse of the world, kept as sacrifices for others.

Perikatherma was the title given to prisoners and others by the Greeks, who sacrificed them to the gods when calamities arose, to save the people from divine wrath. Paul is saying that the apostles were used as scape-goats by the people as a whole. As such they were the 'offscouring' or *peripsoma*, like dung to be wiped off shoes. It is a word used of men who, in the religious sense, undergo severe sufferings so that others may be saved.

So, what Paul was saying to the Corinthians was not flattering! What they were doing was offensive to Paul, to the apostles, and to God. Their lifestyles were not good and were more worldly than spiritual. In their everyday dealings the Corinthians were making themselves out to be greater than the apostles, who were suffering greatly so that others might know salvation and learn to live as God's children.

(Note: Charismatics tend to use verse 10 to justify acting like clowns. They say they are "fools for Christ's sake". You have now read what this actually means in the text: there is no way that acting like clowns has anything to do with this text!).

Verses 14 & 15

1.

"I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you.

2.

For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

3.

Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me."

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Paraphrase:

'I am saying these things to warn you dear friends, not to make you feel foolish.

You might have thousands of teachers in the churches, but you only have a few authentic church fathers, and I am the one who brought you to salvation by Gospel preaching.

So, I urge you, be my followers.'

Paul now assures his readers of his motives (which, in this case, are expressed, and can be evaluated by others). He is not trying to make them look or feel stupid. He is not trying to make them feel ashamed or to shame them before others. Rather, like a good father, he is trying to protect, as well as admonish, them.

Fathers may not like what their children do, but they love them enough to warn them to stop doing wrong or entering into danger. In so doing they must identify what is wrong and rebuke them, but in love. Paul is here doing just that. He was the instrument used by God to bring these people to salvation. But, as saved people they were now making some big mistakes. Paul identified what those sins were and now wanted them to stop, for their own spiritual good.

He points out that they might have countless teachers in the faith, but, evidently, something was still wrong. They only had one Paul, and one Peter, and one Apollos, etc. These apostles were given the task by God of leading people to Christ and keeping them on the right path, so it was the responsibility of the people to listen, as 'beloved sons' (Paul was speaking mainly to the preachers and pastors, who were all men, of course, hence no mention of women).

Because of these reasons, says Paul, 'I beseech you', ***parakaleo***, exhort, desire, call earnestly. He is instructing the Corinthians to act on what he is saying, because of his God-given office. He is pleading with them; "be ye followers of me."

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This kind of statement has earned Paul the accusation of being 'arrogant', and a self-seeker who only wanted to build his own church and following. This is hardly so, after what he has written to the men of Corinth! No, his call to them was far more spiritually inclined. He was saying: "God gave me a role to perform, which I have completed faithfully. Christ instructed me personally and I have done what He told me to do. Therefore, because I imitate Christ, you should imitate me."

Read that carefully and link it with everything else Paul says, and there is no way that he can be accused of arrogance or empire-building. He is pointing people to Christ, through his own example. He is not asking people to mimic him personally, but to mimic his own path of imitating Christ. The text can even be constructed to say "be followers of Christ, just as I follow Him".

This is very different. He is not asking them to be persecuted or even to die. He is merely asking them to fulfil their individual, personal, obligations as set by God, and so to be whatever God intended them to be. Above all, they were to praise God and not themselves.

Verses 17 - 21

1.

"For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church.

2.

Now some are puffed up, as though I would not come to you.

3.

But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will, and will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power.

4.

For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.

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5.

What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?"

'So that you can put into effect what I have said, I am sending Timothy to you, who I love as a son. He is true to God and he will remind you of what I have taught you – things of Christ that I teach in every church.

Now, I know that some are so full of themselves and they think I will not return to Corinth to take them to task. But, I will come to you again, and soon, if it is God's will!

And when I do come, I will not want to hear their self-important words – I will want to see evidence that God is acting in them.

Salvation is not evidenced in words alone, but in outward Power. So, do you want me to come to you with rebuke, or in love?'

Paul, wanting only the best for the Corinthians, has now warned them about their general behaviour (more specific problems will be dealt with as the letter progresses). He follows this up with an offer of help. He will send Timothy to re-teach them in the things Paul has already preached. No doubt this would be expanded to show how the basic teachings could be applied to a variety of situations. In other words, Paul wanted them to think as believers, not with second-hand teachings, but with their own will, based on a love for God's word to them.

Timothy ('Honouring God') was already well-known to the Christian world as Paul's co-worker. He and his family were converted in 44 AD by the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, either in Lystre or Derbe, where he lived with his mother and grandmother in strict Jewish style (his father appears to have died when Timothy was young). Though tradition says he became bishop of Ephesus and died as a martyr, there is no conclusive evidence for this.

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Timothy was a co-worker in the fullest sense. He was a fine Bible teacher, considered to be an apostle (not one of the 12), and was filled by God's spirit. There could have been no better commendation of his authority and power than to be sent by Paul. Possibly, because Timothy's father was dead, Paul took him under his wing, so becoming Paul's 'adopted' son. It is also a possibility that Paul refers to him as his 'beloved son' because Timothy was a faithful and trusted preacher, saved under Paul's Gospel preaching.

The teaching that Timothy was to 'bring to remembrance' was not new. It was the same teaching that Paul gave to every church. Thus, it was consistent with everything else Paul said. Today, few preachers and pastors teach systematically, as Paul did. Instead, they preach what was taught to them by other preachers in colleges or in books, and tend to speak on random texts.

Paul's way was not just to fill men with his own words, but also to use those words to develop and expand. That is, he wanted every Christian to think for themselves, using his words as a foundation (because they came from Christ), and staying within the boundaries of God's full word.

Some, warns Paul, are 'puffed up', ***phusioo***, full of themselves, arrogant and proud. They conveyed this to others, who gave way to their supposed lofty offices. They thought that Paul would not return, so they carried on imposing their own ways and teachings on the people. So, Paul tells them not to be so sure! If God permitted, he *would* return, either in an attitude of love and gentleness, or with great rebuke (a 'rod', ***rhabdos***, used to beat someone severely)! It was up to them.

Paul reminds them that God's kingdom or rule was not evidenced by words alone, but were proved to be true by spiritual power. Paul wanted to see the *evidence* of salvation in the Corinthians. Anybody can claim to be a Christian, but no-one can prove it by a display of power unless they truly are saved! So, Paul wants to see proof of salvation in his readers. He was not content to simply hear what they had to say... because anyone can say anything and not mean it.

What is this 'power' (for the same goes for us today)? It is mighty work and strength of character, and can sometimes include miracles. It refers to holy virtue, ability and excellence of

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soul. That is, Paul wants to see a reflection of God's power in the lives of the Corinthians, especially their pastors. Such power could never be manufactured or claimed in words alone; it must be shown outwardly as well as in the character of the Believers themselves.

In this way Paul was setting the scene for a future visit. Though he saw the Corinthians as his spiritual children, who he wanted to help, he was also challenging them to prove they were true Believers. They could only provide this proof if they *were* saved, because only a saved person can have a real Christian character plus spiritual power.

It should be said that the main proof that a person is a Christian is his character and not so much in any performances of the miraculous. This is repeated in the rest of scripture.

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