

4:1: *Let a man so account of us, as of ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.*

The words “of us” show that Paul described preachers. First century preachers were “*ministers*” (some translations say “*servants*”). This term (*huperetes*) is found 19 times in the New Testament and it is not the normal word for “minister.” Classical Greek writers used this unique word to say physicians had *ministers* (people who carried out minor medical tasks based upon the doctor’s instructions). Members of the military also had *ministers* (people who carried a soldier’s shields and weapons). *Minister* described a subordinate who had some power but was under the authority of someone else. In the New Testament this term is sometimes translated “officer” (Mt. 5:25; Jn. 7:32). In other places, such as here, it describes an assistant or servant (Lk. 4:20 uses it to describe a synagogue attendant. In Acts 13:5 it is used to describe John Mark). In 1 Cor. 4:1 Paul used it to say he was an *assistant* to Jesus.

Warren Wiersbe (First Corinthians, p. 582) noted how in Classical Greek *minister* literally meant “‘underrowers.’ It described the slaves who rowed the huge Roman galleys. ‘We are not the captains of the ship,’ said Paul, ‘but only the galley slaves who are under orders. Now, is one slave greater than another?’” For the Corinthians the word *minister* meant “We are servants and you must look upon us as such.”

What is taught by this word is still very important because of something else. Most religious groups have a “clergy-laity system.” *Clergy* is a designation for preachers or other religious officials who are usually considered “religious professionals.” In many religious groups the *clergy* are viewed as distinct and are treated as being very special. They are elevated above the “lay people” (i.e. the worshippers or the “person in the pew”). The “lay people” (who are often called the *laity*) have a noticeably inferior role. Although this is a common practice in many churches, the New Testament knows nothing of a clergy-laity system (this is another doctrine devised by men, Mt. 15:9).

Rather than one being elevated above another, God’s people “are all brethren” (Mt. 23:8). Paul said preachers (and even the apostles) were nothing more than servants (this implied they could not be the leaders of the Corinthian factions). Additional information about the modern clergy-laity system is found at the end of the commentary on Heb. 5:1 (see the special study on the word “*ordained*”).

In addition to using a colorful word to describe his work (*minister*), Paul also used the present tense (“*account*”). This implies the information concerning preachers is for all peoples and all times. All who are or will ever be a preacher or have some other very visible role in the church will never be any greater than a servant. Thus, preachers cannot be leaders of various factions, originators of doctrines, heresy hunters, or people who try to dominate a local congregation. Though many modern evangelists seek authority and virtually demand esteem and honor (take a moment to consider how many preachers introduce themselves as “Reverend”), inspiration says preachers are servants. This is further emphasized by the word *account* (*logizomai*), a word meaning “one should *regard* us as servants of Christ” (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 2:355). Paul used this word several times in his writing, and the word occurs nearly a dozen times in Rom. 4. Later in this book it is used in 1 Cor. 13:5b, 11 (“*thought*”).

An example of a minister’s service is found in the word “*stewards*” (*oikonomos*). Willis (p. 106) said *stewards* meant “a kind of chief slave who superintended the household and even the whole property of his master.” We might liken the word to a caretaker. “Stewardship over the goods and house of the master by a devoted servant was part of the ancient culture (Gen. 15:2; 43:19; 44:4; 1 Chron. 28:1). Jesus Christ used that analogy to depict proper Christian service and responsibility (Matt. 20:8; Luke 12:42; 16:1-8). Paul now identified the minister in this fashion” (Gromacki, p. 51). If a person does not communicate the gospel to others, he or she is an unfaithful steward and guilty of wrong! Compare Ezek. 3:18; Acts 20:26-27.

In Lk. 16:1-8 we find that *stewards* were sometimes so fully trusted they would control cash receipts and expenditures (*stewards* is found in the 8th verse of Lk. 16). Here it may be said Paul was a *caretaker* of the “*mysteries of God*.” Elders (a function described in the commentary on 1 Tim. 3:1-7) are also *stewards* (see Tit. 1:7 where this same word is again used). Peter used this same term in 1 Pet. 4:10 to say all Christians are stewards of God’s “manifold grace.”

It has already been noted how the *mysteries of God* is simply another description for Christianity. This expression describes the gospel, the teachings of the New Testament (2:7). Preachers as well as all other Christians are *stewards* of the gospel. We sometimes sing a song with these words: “*Into our hands the gospel is given, into our hands is given the light, haste, let us carry God’s precious message, guiding the erring back to the right.*” God has entrusted us with His word and faithful Christians must take that message to the entire world (Mk. 16:15-16; Mt. 28:18-20). Faithful stewardship also means we do not add to or take away from the word of God, a point made in the beginning of the Bible (Deut. 4:2; 12:32), the middle of the Bible (Prov. 30:6), and the end of the Bible (Rev. 22:18-19).

The word *steward* also occurs in 1 Cor. 4:2. While Paul and others were to be regarded as *caretakers of the gospel* (and the Corinthians should have loved and appreciated them for this work), this was no basis for honoring them in the way the Corinthians did (1 Cor. 1:12) and creating strife in the church. Warren Wiersbe (First Corinthians, p. 582) said this chapter “presents three pictures of the minister—a steward (1 Cor. 4:1-6), a spectacle (1 Cor. 4:7-13), and a father (1 Cor. 4:14-21).”

4:2: Here, moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.

Because we are *stewards* of God’s word (verse 1), we have a duty. This responsibility is described by the word “*faithful*” (*pistos*). Those who deal with God’s word must be dependable, trustworthy, faithful, and honest. One of the essential qualities in God’s people (and especially for those who preach) is fidelity. The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (3:97) said in this passage *faithful* has the general sense of being “found *trustworthy*.” “The requirement of stewards of God, as well as of stewards of men, is faithfulness, i.e., administration of trust according to directions (1 Cor. 4:2)” (Baker’s Dictionary of Theology, p. 502). Faithfulness means we will do our very best to carry out all we have been commanded (see again the commentary on verse 1).

“Stewardship (*oikonomia*) is a compound word in the Greek, meaning the management of a household. The person who administers the household is called a steward (*oikonomos*, ‘law of the house’) or an overseer (*epitropos*). The idea has its roots in the institution of slavery. The master appointed a slave to administer his household which might include the teaching and disciplining of the members of the house, especially other slaves and children. A classic example is the position of Joseph in Potiphar’s house (Gen. 39:4-6). The ordinary idea of stewardship is found in several passages in the NT” (Baker’s Dictionary of Theology, p. 502). “The modern emphasis on the stewardship of possessions, while true, may tend to obscure the fact that the Christian’s primary stewardship is that of the gospel and includes the use of his whole life as well as his money” (ibid).

Another important aspect of good stewardship involves all who preach and teach. Today some faithful preachers are rejected by congregations because they are not eloquent in speech, are not the “right age,” “no longer understand the modern times,” speak too long, or do not meet some unreasonable expectation of Christians. It is often the case that the saved as well as the unsaved have one standard for a preacher while God has another. God’s judgment bar for preachers is faithfulness to His word and this needs to be our standard as well. Faithfulness is **the** standard for preachers and every other child of God. Paul’s point may be related to Rom. 1:16—the power is in the message, not the messenger. Faithful preachers believe and teach that God’s word is inspired and authoritative. These men know where the power is (Eph. 6:17) and they use it. It is sad to see and say that eloquent speakers who are unfaithful with God’s word are often welcomed with open arms and greeted by large crowds. Churches frequently welcome those who can tell jokes and amuse the goats with snappy illustrations each week (see again the commentary about Charles Spurgeon on 1:20-21). There is nothing wrong with appreciating good speakers and talented teachers, but the right “test” for an evangelist is sound doctrine and absolute faithfulness to God’s word (Tit. 2:1). God has given us the standard to judge preachers and we must not use any other.

Faithfulness to the word of God is a necessary part of good stewardship, and this is an on-going requirement because *required* (*zeteo*) is a present tense verb. Bengel (2:183) added, “By investigation, when the time comes” (faithfulness may not seem important now, but a time will come when it will be critically important). We will one day be judged on our stewardship, so we need to create the right kind of

record as we go through life (Lk. 12:42-48). Being a good steward involves many things. We all have time, various abilities, money, and perhaps unique influence. What we possess must be put to good use, because we are *stewards* of all we have (compare Mt. 25:14, 19). In the opening chapters of the Bible (Gen. 1-3) we find God teaching man about stewardship. Jesus said some stewards are faithful and some are not (Lk. 16:1-13).

Being a good steward is not only an obligation, it can inspire others. “During the opening years of the Second World War, the superior military resources and surprise movements of the German armies almost succeeded in defeating the British and forcing them to surrender. British military and civilian forces found courage and strength to continue the fight as they listened to the eloquent, courageous speeches by Prime Minister Winston Churchill. In May 1940, just after becoming prime minister, Churchill told his countrymen: ‘I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.’

“In June 1940, the Royal Navy rescued 335,000 French and British soldiers from a triangular trap in Dunkirk, France. The army left behind all its equipment and saw 30,000 soldiers killed, wounded, or missing. In such a dark day the British found courage when Churchill challenged them over the radio: ‘We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France and on the sea and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender.

“Churchill’s courage provided an example for his countrymen to imitate. It gave them an incentive to show more discipline and to work harder at a goal of stopping the German advance and preserving their country. It produced in them a stamina which they needed to resist the attacks of the enemy” (Holman, 10:98-99).

4:3-4: *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. 4 For I know nothing against myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.*

In the previous two verses Paul presented the standard for judging preachers (i.e. faithfulness—stewards must be faithful). Here he added to the thought. How can we know if someone is faithful? Paul told the Corinthians, “If you judge me” (and they did, 2 Cor. 10:10), “it doesn’t bother me.” Paul said it was a “*small*” thing. *Small* (*elachistos*) has been defined as “practically nothing” (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 1:427). The “legitimate court of judgment” will happen when the Lord appears for a second and final time (ibid). More information about the word *small* is available in the commentary on 1 Cor. 6:2.

Paul knew the standard for judging preachers and he knew the Corinthians were not using it. In fact, Paul said he did not judge himself (3b, and *judge* is a present tense verb). Paul recognized that when it comes to judging others, especially preachers and their work, the only adequate judge is God. Thus, Paul was content to let God be the sole judge of how he handled himself and his ministry. “Paul may be regarded either as judge or witness in his own case. As a witness he knows that nothing is on his conscience. As a judge, he may not on that account decide in his own case, or declare himself justified” (Bengel, 2:183-184). Compare Ps. 19:12.

Paul’s choice about letting God judge him is still relevant for all preachers and Christians. Christians are not the judge for preachers and Christians are certainly not qualified to judge their own lives. Paul said “*man’s judgment*” (verse 3, the best judgment man can give—perhaps this imagines judgment in a court setting) is inadequate. “If Paul had merely said, **by you**, and nothing more, this might have been enough to make them feel hurt that he held them in contempt. But in fact when he adds, **or by any human court**, he softens the blow by showing that he holds others in contempt as well” (The Church’s Bible, p. 72). There is only one lawgiver and judge (Jas. 4:12). We can and must compare ourselves to God’s “law of liberty” (Jas. 1:23-25), but God is our true judge.

“The phrase *man’s judgment* is literally ‘man’s day.’ This is in contrast to *God’s* day of judgment yet to come” (Warren Wiersbe, First Corinthians, p. 582). “The passing of human judgment upon others was

as common in his time as it is today. Such decisions are ‘before the time.’ They are carried out in the day of man, whose reasoning and judging powers have been distorted by the spiritual blindness of a world in revolt against God. Human judgments of every kind thus become easily prejudiced in either direction” (CBL, GED, 3:58).

The Bible does say we can make determinations about our own selves (2 Cor. 13:5 and 1 Cor. 11:28). It is also true that we can determine if others are teaching the truth or error (1 Thess. 5:21). In the next chapter Paul made a judgment about a situation at Corinth (1 Cor. 5:3), and he spoke to the Corinthians about judging fellow members of the church (1 Cor. 5:12; 6:2). Christians are authorized to “judge righteously” (Jn. 7:24), and they also recognize the only true and perfect judge with ultimate significance is God. Today if Christians have complaints about preachers or other Christians, the criticism should be considered. However, ministers and all others must remember their final judge is God, not fellow believers.

When we strive to live, act, and serve God to the best of our ability, we can say what Paul said in 4a: “*I know nothing against myself.*” Since Paul did the very best he could (he could find no serious flaw in his ministry), anyone who was unhappy with him or displeased with his efforts would need to leave the matter to God and the coming judgment. God’s advice to us is resolve problems when possible (Mt. 18:21-22 and Rom. 12:18), but matters that cannot be worked out must be left in God’s hands, for He is just and perfect.

Verse 4 also offers some insight about Paul’s conscience (he claimed to have a clean conscience). People obtain a clean conscience by becoming a Christian (Heb. 10:22). Conversion to Christ includes being baptized (1 Cor. 12:13) for the forgiveness of our sins (Acts 2:38), and after baptism a person’s conscience is cleansed (1 Pet. 3:20-21; Heb. 10:22). Baptism, forgiveness, and a clean conscience leave people with a “peace that passes all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). Since Paul affirmed his conscience was clean, this implies he did not knowingly do anything to cause the divisions at Corinth or elsewhere. Paul made similar statements about his life and work in Acts 20:18-19, 26-27 and the Second Corinthian letter (2 Cor. 7:2; 12:17).

Although Paul had a clear conscience, he said he was *not* “*justified.*” This statement is instructive and interesting. It is not difficult to find people who think their “clean conscience” will be the basis for getting into heaven. Many feel confident about spending eternity with God because their conscience does not condemn them. Paul realized a clean conscience is no indication or proof of justification. He did not believe his clean conscience was proof of his salvation. In fact, when he said his justification did not work in this way, he used a perfect tense verb (i.e. justification had *never* been based upon his conscience). A murderer may have a clean conscience, but this does not mean he is forgiven of his sin and saved (compare 1 Tim. 4:2b). All will be justified or condemned by the Lord (4b – “*he that judgeth me is the Lord*”), not their conscience. When Paul spoke of the *Lord judging him*, he used a present tense verb (this implies God looks at our lives in an on-going way). There is forgiveness for the past when we repent and change, but there is no way to let “past successes” continue to justify us if we do not continue to “walk in the light” (1 Jn. 1:7). God justifies or condemns based upon what we continue to do with His word.

Justification only comes through the Lord, because only He has this authority (Rom. 5:1, 9-12). We can know we have been justified if we have “obeyed the gospel” (Mt. 7:21; 2 Thess. 1:7-9). Another helpful reference is Prov. 21:2: “*Every way of a man is right in his own eyes; But Jehovah weigheth the hearts.*” God judges us based upon how we respond to His word (we obey it or we do not).

4:5: *Wherefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall each man have his praise from God.*

This verse, as well as the preceding two passages, has often been used to forbid people from making judgments. This is incorrect and this subject is dealt with in the commentary on verses 3-4. Here it may be noted that if “Judgment is forbidden,” all who make this claim have just made a *judgment* about judgment! When people say that condemnation is wrong, they actually do the very thing they object to

and thus condemn themselves. Such an action is outright hypocrisy (compare Rom. 2:21-23).

It is odd that people nearly shout at Christians “Judging is wrong,” and then later let others know how they believe “war is wrong,” “slavery was wrong,” etc. Radical liberals (and this includes liberalism in the secular and religious realms) often fault Bible believing people for making judgments based on the Scriptures and then seek to mask their own judgments by referring to them with different terminology. Liberals often disguise their judgments by code-words such as “critique, criticism, evaluation, assessment.” Instead of being judgmental, liberals sometimes call themselves “activists.” If one really listens, it does not take long to find that the harshest critics and the most judgmental people are found within liberalism. Liberals are typically more adept at cloaking their judgments, but they excel with criticism. If judgment is forbidden, Jesus erred in some of His teaching (Matt. 7:15-23; Jn. 7:24).

The *judgment* forbidden in this verse is explained in the previous verses. Some of the Corinthians were judging (present tense) certain preachers as deserving of praise (1:12; 3:4, 22). Other brethren were judged as fools and unwise (4:10). The Corinthians needed to understand their judgments were premature, immature and wrong. Only the Lord can make the types of judgments the Corinthians had made. These Christians needed to abandon the type of judging Paul described.

When the Lord comes He will expose everything that has been “*hidden*.” *Hidden (kruptos)* is used in some other well-known passages. Jesus used it in Mt. 6:4 to describe “alms being given in *secret*.” He spoke about *secret* (hidden) prayer in Mt. 6:6 and *secret* fasting in Mt. 6:18. Paul used this term to describe the coming day of judgment in the Roman letter (Rom. 2:16; the *secrets* of men). Peter applied this word to wives in 1 Pet. 3:4. “Truly the *heart* of man is a secret place” (Bengel, 2:184). Concerning the word “*darkness*,” this is a place “where no human vision penetrates” (Bengel, 2:184). “This probably refers to deeds done when a person is alone, totally unsupervised or watched by men” (Gromacki, p. 53).

Jesus will also “*make manifest the counsels of the hearts*.” The word “*counsels*” (*boule*) is in the neuter gender, so the term describes things that are both good and evil. Paul was describing the *motives* of the heart (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 1:224). Kittel (abridged edition, p. 109) defined the counsels as “inward intentions.” In addition to judging our actions (see the previous paragraph), God will also judge man’s motives. Were men motivated by a love for self, God, or others? In this single verse Paul affirmed that Jesus will reveal things for what they really were. All relevant facts about a person’s life will be considered. Some who were considered to be pillars in the church will be exposed as reprobates. Other church members who were perhaps viewed as insignificant and useless will be recognized for significant contributions.

When all the facts come out, “*each man*” will be “*praised*” (5b) or not praised. *Praised (epainos)* describes the recognition from God on the Day of Judgment (compare Mt. 25:21, 23). God’s favorable recognition of human beings is found here, Rom. 2:29 and 1 Pet. 1:7. This will be part of His “saving verdict on the day of judgment” (Brown, 3:817). By using this term Paul showed that no one on the judgment day will be slighted, cheated, or incorrectly judged. An earthly example of this thorough judgment is found in Acts 5:1-11. “The world praises its princes, generals, ambassadors, wise men, artists: God will hereafter praise his ministers” (Bengel, 2:184).

Several points are made in the Bible about the final judgment of men. God’s word was produced over a period of approximately 1,400 years and it will be the judge of all people. Jesus promised this in Jn. 12:48. See, too, Jas. 2:12. God has a record of each person’s life (He is omnipotent—all knowing), and this information will include the smallest details. God will know all we said (Mt. 12:36) and did (Rev. 20:12; Mt. 16:27). God will even know what was in our hearts (Lk. 16:15).

The material in verse 6 begins a new section. Paul continued to deal with some of the schisms at Corinth, and this is one of the places where he used strong sarcasm. There are times when strong language is needed, and the next verse is a place where the apostle was not gentle.

4:6: *Now these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes; that in us ye might learn not (to go) beyond the things which are written; that no one of you be puffed up for the one against the other.*

The words “*these things*” are hard to explain. Did Paul refer back to the material in 3:5-4:5? Was he thinking of the information in 1:10-4:5? Concluding that Paul reached all the way back to the first chapter does no violence to the text, and this may be what “*these things*” refers to. Whatever he had in mind, he definitely appealed to Scripture. He and the other apostles, just like Jesus, repeatedly called attention to the word of God because this is the only authoritative source in matters of religion (see this point developed more fully in the commentary on 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Today if we are going to preach or teach, we must continually point people to the Scriptures.

In the verse at hand Paul referred to himself and “*Apollos*.” He said he had “*transferred to himself and Apollos some things for the sake of the Corinthians*.” That is, instead of specifically naming the troublemakers at Corinth, Paul used himself and Apollos as examples. He *transferred* the condemnation and sin of division to people like himself and his co-worker. Paul used principles instead of personalities to deal with church conflict.

The word rendered *transferred* (*metaschematizo*) is used in some interesting ways in the New Testament. It is used in conjunction with the second coming of Christ in Phil. 3:21. Paul also used it in 2 Cor. 11:13, 14, and 15 to describe Satan. Here it describes an example. “If there are no antitheses between the apostle and Apollos, the church has no right to form a party for the one against the other” (Kittel, 7:958).

There are at least two reasons for Paul using himself and another faithful Christian as examples. First, if it was wrong for faithful and prominent men like Paul to have a following, it was wrong for the less prominent Christians. “The sandlot baseball concept of choosing up sides should not be followed by humble Christians” (Gromacki, p. 54). Paul argued from the greater (himself and Apollos) to the lesser (the Corinthians) to show that the division was sinful. A second reason is found in the words “*your sakes*.” Paul could have specifically given the names of those involved in the factions. Rather than naming names, Paul took a more general approach and even used himself and Apollos as illustrations. Paul did his best to delicately deal with a terrible problem. This tact may have been designed to reduce or prevent anger among the Corinthians. Paul had, figuratively speaking, a fire to deal with and he chose to use water instead of piling on wood. Doing things *for their sakes* meant Paul was as inoffensive as possible. He was concerned about the Corinthians’ feelings and tried to injure them as little as necessary.

Paul and Apollos were used as examples, so the Corinthians would not go “*beyond what was written*.” The KJV offers a clearer understanding of the text (“*that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written*”). *Going beyond what was written* meant following men and/or worldly philosophies. Following men, creating a faction based upon a human being, or becoming involved in beliefs not found in the New Testament would result in God’s disapproval and spiritual harm (compare 1:19, 31; 3:19-20). Clarke’s commentary says, “I have written as if myself and Apollos were the authors of the sects which now prevail among you; although others, without either our consent or knowledge, have proclaimed us heads of parties. Dr. Pearce paraphrases the verse thus: ‘I have made use of my own and Apollos’ name in my arguments against your divisions, because I would spare to name those teachers among you who are guilty of making and heading parties; and because I would have you, by our example, not to value them above what I have said of teachers in general in this epistle; so that none of you ought to be puffed up for one against another.’”

When Paul spoke about the things that had been *written*, he used the perfect tense. He appealed to what had been written in the past and affirmed that the force of these writings was still intact. This is still true for us. The written material that applied to the Corinthians and God’s word still applies to mankind. It is, therefore, critical that we follow the Scriptures (be sure to compare this thought to Lev. 10:1-2—two verses that describe men who went beyond what God had instructed). God’s word is truth (Jn. 17:17), it has “*commandments*” (1 Cor. 14:37), and Jesus Himself recognized that man is to “*live by every word that has proceeded from God*” (Mt. 4:4). Jesus also said people “*err*” when they do not know the Scriptures (Mt. 22:29). Using something besides the Bible for matters such as worship invalidates what we offer to God (Mk. 7:13). Paul reminded Timothy that the Scriptures give man all he needs (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Paul also spoke about the need to do things in harmony with Jesus’ authority (Col. 3:17 and see the commentary on this verse). If Jesus’ words are “*life*” (Jn. 6:63), then not following them means *death*.

One of the things *not written* in God's word is *pride* (6b). Those guilty of pride ("*puffed up*") have *gone beyond what is written*. *Puffed up* (*phusioo*) is "rare in non-Christian texts" (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 3:444). Here the word means "do not *become puffed up/self important* for the one against the other (i.e., for Paul against Apollos and vice versa)" (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 3:444). Being proud about one teacher and not another (or elevating one teacher above another) is contrary to the ways of Christ and Christian living. If the Corinthians had stayed with what was *written*, this problem would have been limited or not existed. An inordinate amount of affection for teachers was a contributing factor to the division at Corinth and it is often a contributing factor to many church problems today. In fact, it has often been a key or the sole force in splitting local congregations. More information on *puffed up* may be found in the commentary on 1 Cor. 13:4.

The principle in verse 6 is extremely helpful for all Christians until the end of time. If we avoid going beyond what is written (ASV translation), we will abide by what the Bible says concerning the work, worship, and organization of Christ's church. If the New Testament does not describe a "church headquarters" and our religious group has one, this is going beyond what has been written. If the plan for New Testament worship is altered, is this not another example of *going beyond what is written*? We must do things exactly as God has said or we will not be saved (2 Jn. 9). For a special study on *following a divine pattern*, see the commentary on Heb. 8:5 as well as the study on New Testament Christianity at the end of this commentary.

Some have argued that the material in verse 6 came from a proverb or a well-known saying. This conclusion is then used to deny that Christians must avoid *going beyond what is written* (i.e. people can really do whatever they want concerning Christianity). This argument is unsound for many reasons. If these words were a proverb or saying, the information has never been found. If these words were a proverb, what did they mean? From what were people forbidden? This expression came from God, and it is certainly possible it was a common saying among Christians. Even if the expression did originate from a human source, that in no way diminishes its force or the point. We know Paul quoted a non-Christian poet to prove a point (Tit. 1:12-13) as well as an inscription on an altar (Acts 17:23). Paul used these words and they mean exactly what they say. Our religious activities and actions must be authorized by God (for a special study on Bible authority, see the commentary on Col. 3:17). See, too, the commentary below on verses 16-17.

The CBL (First Corinthians, p. 301) suggested the Corinthians "were apparently also exalting their own traditions as equal to or better than the Scriptures. Literally, the Greek reads that 'you may learn not above what is written,' meaning that no human tradition or view can be placed above Scripture." This information should have crushed the pride and division among the Corinthians. It should also serve as an important reminder for all now living. *We must not go beyond what is written* in the sense that we do not add anything to or take anything from God's word (Rev. 22:18-19; 2 Jn. 9).

Instead of ending his attack on the factions at Corinth, Paul continued to deal with this sin by asking three questions. These questions (verse 7) laid bare the sin of pride and further call the Corinthians to repentance.

4:7: *For who maketh thee to differ? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? but if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?*

This verse contains three questions, and these questions were asked to either create or renew humility in the lives of the proud Corinthians. Paul's first question ("*For who maketh thee to differ?*") is rhetorical. This question implies that everyone is not the same. Some have certain gifts, talents, or abilities not possessed by others (compare 12:8-10 and see the commentary on 7:17). Since we are all "different," *who* should be held responsible for the differences? The answer is *God*. God has willed that men possess different abilities and talents. Because God has given different abilities to each person, there is no basis for bragging and boasting.

Paul's second question is also easy to understand and answer. What do we have that has not been "*received*" (given to us)? The answer is nothing. Everything we have has come from God. We came from

the womb with nothing but life. Our daily lives are a gift from God, and we leave the world with nothing (1 Tim. 6:7). We only possess an eternal spirit, but this, too, ultimately belongs to God. Paul's second question showed the Corinthians how their spiritual gifts, all their spiritual knowledge, all their health and wealth...everything they had came from God. This is still true. Because all we have is from God, who can boast?

The final question is also based upon the fact that everything the Corinthians possessed came from God. Paul recognized this in the first part of the question ("*But if thou didst receive it*"). Since everything these Christians enjoyed and used derived from God, and the Corinthians owed appreciation to God for all they possessed, Paul asked why they "*gloried*" (bragged). The Corinthians acted as if they were responsible for what they had. They were like the man who attributes great intellect to his own self discipline, study and education. The rich sometimes attribute their wealth to their shrewdness and hard work. If we were responsible for what we have, then we could boast. Because we are not ultimately responsible for what we possess (Jas. 1:17 says things we own are merely *gifts*), boasting is wrong and must be avoided. The Corinthians boasted so much about what they had and what they had done God was not properly honored. Today this problem still exists.

4:8: *Already are ye filled, already ye are become rich, ye have come to reign without us: yea and I would that ye did reign, that we also might reign with you.*

Here is an example of the Corinthians' pride (Paul previously spoke of the Corinthians' smugness in places like 6b). These Christians were "*filled*" ("*full*," KJV). This term (*korennumi*) is used only here and Acts 27:38. In Acts 27 it describes people who had eaten all they wanted (they were full). Here *filled* is a perfect tense verb and is anything but complimentary. In this context it means self satisfaction. The perfect tense also indicates the Corinthians had reached this state in the past and were still this way when this letter was written. Paul used sarcasm to say pride caused the Corinthians to view themselves as spiritual giants. Stated another way, these Christians were full of themselves. They regarded themselves as spiritual elitists—cream of the crop church members. Certainly in their minds they did not need to grow and were not spiritually immature (1 Cor. 3:1-4).

Gingrich and Danker (p. 444) said *filled* in this passage means "*you already have all you could wish, i.e. you think you already have all the spiritual food you need.*" The Corinthians apparently had the same type of outlook on life as the Laodiceans (see Rev. 3:17). In verse 8 the word "*rich*" (*plouteo*) means "*obtained the eternal spiritual possessions*" (Thayer, p. 519). Paul meant "*rich in a religious sense*" (Gingrich and Danker, p. 674). Later in this book (1 Cor. 13:9-12) Paul told the Corinthians how the spiritual gifts they possessed were simply "*in part.*" Although these Christians were thrilled with spiritual gifts, the *perfect* (the fully revealed word of God as we now have it) was yet to come. They mistakenly put at least some of their enthusiasm on things that were temporal and incomplete.

The pride and conceit were so bad these Christians "*reigned without the apostles.*" In other words, the Corinthians believed they were rulers in the kingdom, but the apostles were not. The Corinthians considered themselves superior to others, including some or all the apostles. Since Paul said the Corinthians followed the apostles (1:12), it seems this statement was a hyperbole (an exaggeration for emphasis). The Corinthians were so blinded by pride Paul mockingly said they were superior to the apostles. If we had no other verse but this passage we would know the problems at Corinth were very, very severe.

Paul's sarcasm is striking. He first spoke about the Corinthians being *filled*, then said they were *rich*, and finally claimed they *reigned* (the KJV also uses the word "kings"). Although we may not expect to find a Bible author using sarcasm, Paul did use this tool and he was not the first preacher to employ it (1 Kgs. 18:27). At the present time many who preach and teach also use sarcasm. Sometimes this is used effectively, but it is often ineffective because teachers are young and inexperienced. Sarcasm is a type of irony that makes a point in a humorous way. It does have a place in speaking and writing if someone is a good wordsmith, but most use it badly and the end result is tragedy. Paul used sarcasm under inspiration so God has shown that sarcasm can have a place in the work of a Christian. However we also find that

Paul used this tool sparingly. If and when preachers and teachers use sarcasm today, it needs to be used carefully as a little sarcasm goes a long way.

Though there were significant problems at Corinth, Paul had a sincere desire for things to be corrected. He said, “*I would that ye did reign, that we also might reign with you*” (it was like he was saying, “I wish this really were true”). While the Corinthians felt like they had found spiritual maturity, Paul knew this was not true (compare Phil. 3:12-14 where Paul showed how the Christian life is a continual process). Paul hoped the Corinthians would rid themselves of the pride, correct their problems related to worship, and end the division so everyone would be living in the same way and striving for the same eternal home. All these goals are still the right things for our day and time.

4:9-10: *For, I think, God hath set forth us the apostles last of all, as men doomed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, both to angels and men. 10 We are fools for Christ’s sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye have glory, but we have dishonor.*

Towards the beginning of this chapter (verses 3-4), Paul noted how the Corinthians *judged* him and their judgment was not favorable (Paul did not live up to their expectations). In the previous verse Paul spoke of how the Corinthians were full, rich, and reigned as kings. These Christians regarded themselves as “first” and prosperous, while faithful servants like Paul faced the tribulations described in verse 9. At Corinth members of the church drew favorable conclusions about themselves while being very harsh on others, especially faithful preachers. It seemed like the Corinthians were spiritual overachievers while Paul and his co-workers were failures. One wonders how many modern congregations also judge their preachers and conclude their local evangelist is not performing up to their expectations while they are just about perfect.

Since the Corinthians judged him, Paul discussed his life as well as what had happened in the lives of the other apostles. His conclusions were vastly different from what the Corinthians had concluded. Paul and his co-workers were deprived of life’s necessities. They were often insecure and had to struggle while the Corinthians were proud, complacent, secure, and rich (3:21b). Since Paul and other faithful brethren were defamed and ill-treated, he pointed out the facts and “turned the tables” on the Corinthians’ self-esteem. They needed to repent of the things in which they took pride and begin to respect Paul for what they thought made him despised. They had no basis for their pride, and thus no basis for their divisions described in the opening chapter. In order to gain what they thought they already had, they would have to become the kind of people who would have no reason to divide into factions. A more detailed study of these verses follows, but here a helpful thought from Barnes (First Corinthians, p. 75) is offered. Being poor is not dishonorable, especially if such poverty is the result of helping others.

Paul said much of his suffering could be attributed to “*God*” (verse 9). *God* is the one who is emphasized in this verse. The apostles faced a variety of unpleasant circumstances and suffering because this was God’s will. One of the things God willed was the *position* of the apostles. These men were often “*last*.” The exact meaning of this word is unknown. Some think Paul had in mind the first century games. At the end of many “*spectacles*” (9b) men were often brought out at the *last* so they could fight to the death. In some cases the gladiators were left naked (this may be part of the point in verse 11) and defenseless. No clothing meant every blow would damage the body and every attack with a knife or sword would leave a wound. We have no evidence of the apostles ever suffering this fate so Paul may have simply used this imagery to describe great suffering.

Spectacle (*theatron*) has been defined as a “place of seeing, especially for dramatic representation, a theatre” (Willis, p. 119). It indicates a Christian’s punishment, opposition, or death was and still is like a performance (i.e. these activities are watched). Those in the first century who suffered this fate in the amphitheatre games had no hope of escape, and Paul may have been thinking such was also his lot in life (he was destined to suffer for most if not all his remaining years).

Paul realized the unsaved were watching as well as heavenly creatures (Eph. 3:10). Angels had watched Jesus (1 Tim. 3:16), so it is not surprising to find them watching the apostles, other first century Christians, and even the people of God today. Sometimes these heavenly creatures saw Christians

“doomed to death” (condemned). It was as if “God ‘displayed’ the apostles as ‘the scum of the earth’ (1 Corinthians 4:13, NIV)—appointed to die. They were made a spectacle to the world, to angels as well as men. To Paul this was a demonstration to the entire universe that the apostles were sharing in the sufferings of Christ (cf. Philippians 3:10). The assembly at Corinth was less willing to participate in such adversity; they preferred to be honored by the world as wise and strong (i.e., powerful)” (CBL, GED, 1:355). MacKnight (p. 153) believes the word *last* shows how the apostles were the *last* in the line of prophets and other great men who were in a real fight. This explanation is consistent with some of the other words and descriptions in verse 9: *spectacle, appointed to death, set forth*.

Greeks in the first century ended a day’s activities in the amphitheatre by watching gladiators fight or watching wild beasts attack and kill condemned men. Men selected for these gory games were destined for death. If a man happened to win, he was entered into the next contest. Every condemned man knew he would die in the games, and the apostles suffered great conflict. We read of how James was beheaded by Agrippa (Acts 12:1-2). Peter, according to tradition, was crucified upside down. Tradition also says Nero had Paul crucified. The only record we have of a non-violent death among the apostles is John. He was exiled to the island of Patmos where he supposedly died a peaceful death. This information is all consistent with the word translated “*set forth*” (*apodeiknumi*) in 9a. This term means the apostles were like “the grand finale in the exhibition” (CBL, GED, 1:355). Rienecker and Rogers (p. 397) said this word was a “technical word of bringing a person into the arena.” As stated in the previous commentary, this may not be what the apostles literally experienced. It was often conflict of a different type (Eph. 6:12), but no less serious than what ancient gladiators faced.

Angels have and seem to continue to watch what happens as time continues to pass (compare Lk. 15:7, 10; 1 Cor. 11:10; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). Here it seems angels are more interested in a Christian’s faith than the actual pain inflicted on a Christian’s physical body. Rather than wanting to see the actual wounds, it appears angels are most interested in seeing Christians persevere and continue the Christian way of life. “What a great show is offered to the eyes of the mind when the spirit is intact and unbroken even as the body is torn to pieces” (The Church’s Bible, p. 77).

Paul did not specify whether the angels that watch are good angels or evil angels (evil angels might take “savage delight” in seeing the people of God undergo severe trials). Perhaps he meant both. MacKnight (p. 153) said, “it must have animated the apostles in combating with their persecutors, to think that they were disappointing the malice of evil spirits, while they were making the angels in heaven and good men on earth, happy, by the faith, and patience, and fortitude which they were exerting in so noble a cause.”

Not only did Paul and others often suffer terribly while the Corinthians were spared the agony of persecution (verse 10), the Corinthians managed to live very pleasant lives. Paul said he and his co-workers were “*fools*” (in the eyes of the world) while the *Corinthians* were “*wise*” (*phronimos*). While *wise* is normally used in a good way (compare its usage in Mt. 25:2), in this passage it is used with irony to mock the Corinthians (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 3:440). Here it denotes sarcastic truth (the Corinthians were not wise). Rienecker and Rogers (p. 397) defined it as “sensible, smart.”

In the eyes of the unsaved, Paul was a *fool* (this same word is used in 1:25, 27; 3:18). Paul used the word *fool* for several reasons. Before becoming a Christian he had studied under *Gamaliel*, a highly respected Jewish teacher (Acts 22:3). Paul possessed Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37). His writings show he was very intelligent. If Paul had stayed with Judaism, he could have been an important and influential Jewish leader. He could have served as an influential Jewish rabbi and enjoyed a pleasant and comfortable life. Because Paul chose to abandon a promising career, he found himself in a completely different and difficult set of circumstances. His life was unpleasant, but the Corinthians did not face many unpleasanties. In fact, they considered Paul to be the problem. This was one of the reasons why the members of this congregation so vexed him.

Another contrast between Paul and the Corinthians is found in the words “*we are weak, but ye are strong*.” In this verse *weak* (*asthenes*) means Paul’s appearance and manner of speaking were not overly impressive. If there were a contest between Paul and the Corinthians, Paul would have been considered the least impressive preacher. Paul’s *weakness* was also demonstrated by the Corinthians enjoying the

good life while he suffered (verses 9, 11, 12).

A final comparison between Paul and the Corinthians is found at the end of verse 10. The Corinthians had “*glory*” (or “*are honorable*,” KJV). This term (*endoxos*) is only found here, Lk. 7:25; 13:17; and Eph. 5:27. In this passage it is contrasted with “*dishonor*.” Rienecker and Rogers (p. 397) defined it as “honored, distinguished, eminent.” It shows how the Corinthians were held in honor, but the apostles were held in disrepute (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 1:451). The word *dishonor* (“*despised*,” KJV) is only found here, Mt. 13:57; Mk. 6:4; and 1 Cor. 12:23 (the original term is *atimos*). In the gospels it describes a lack of respect. Here the meaning is “*despised*” (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 1:177). Pride caused the Corinthians to have an exalted view of themselves and loathsome feelings towards Christians like Paul.

Three powerful contrasts are given in verse 10. There is a *mental* contrast (“fools” versus “wise”). There is a *physical* contrast (“weak” versus “strong”). There is also a *social* contrast (“glory” versus “dishonor”). “God is the one who set up this spectacle and He uses the weakness of His servants in order to demonstrate His power and strength” (Rienecker and Rogers, p. 397).

4:11-12: *Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place; 12 and we toil, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure;*

The Corinthians needed to know the truth about themselves and Paul. To make things very clear, Paul described his circumstances when he wrote this letter (verse 11, “*present hour*”). “This means: I am not telling you ancient history but speaking of the present time” (The Church’s Bible, p. 77). Contrary to the modern media evangelists who say God’s people should be wealthy and prosperous, Paul was poor. He was so short of funds he had to engage in manual labor to meet his needs (Acts 20:34). He suffered from “*hunger*” (*peinao*). This is a present tense verb (see how it is also used in Mt. 4:2; 25:37, 42; Phil. 4:12). Paul suffered “*thirst*” (*dipsao*), another present tense verb. *Thirst* has both a literal and figurative meaning in the New Testament; here the sense is literal. Paul described the most basic necessities of life and said he lacked these items on a regular basis (some of God’s best people have suffered in horrible ways, Lk. 16:20-22). Those who claim faithful Christians always have “health and wealth” if they will just “sow the seed” (i.e. send in a financial contribution to a certain religious group) are evil workers who use the gospel to gain filthy lucre (1 Tim. 6:5). Paul gave and helped as much as anyone, but he lacked the most elementary items related to physical life.

Paul was so poor he told the Corinthians he was “*naked*” (*gumneteuo*). This word is a present tense verb and it meant *poorly clad and destitute of proper or sufficient clothing*. Bengel (2:187) called this the “extreme of poverty” and cites 2 Cor. 11:27 as a cross-reference. The apostle did not have enough money to buy nice clothes and this was not a “one time” problem. Paul regularly lacked decent clothing (he was shabbily dressed), but he was not ashamed to appear before kings. He was willing to preach the gospel wearing rags (tattered clothing). The heralds of the kingdom were not “adorned with any splendor. We imagine that we are quite different” (Bengel, 2:187). Bengel is, unfortunately, quite right. How many refuse to attend worship because they “don’t have something to wear?” Paul was not talking about worship. He meant he often had to preach the gospel in tattered clothing. Knowing what this apostle did leaves absolutely no excuse for people avoiding some aspect of God’s work because they do not have clothing “good enough” for the task at hand.

The word “*buffeted*” (*kolaphizo*) is another present tense verb and it meant “hit with the fist, box a person’s ears, mistreat” (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 2:306). This term is also found in 2 Cor. 12:7 (Satan delivered a “thorn in the flesh” which *buffeted* Paul). Peter used it in 1 Pet. 2:20. Here the word means the apostles suffered physical abuse because of who they were and what they taught. A loose translation of the thought might be “the apostles were knocked around.” This same term is applied to the Lord’s suffering before He went to the cross (Mt. 26:67).

These preachers also had “*no certain dwelling place*” (*astateo*), and this too, is a present tense verb. Because the apostles often traveled, there was no place they could truly call home. “From this context of

deprivations we see the emphasis not so much on wandering as being without a home. Most modern translations render it ‘homeless’” (CBL, GED, 1:472). Perhaps some or most of the apostles sold their houses so they could more fully devote their lives to teaching the gospel. Enemies of the gospel may have also contributed to their homeless state. Given the persecution described in the book of Acts, evangelists like Paul may have had to stay in several houses to avoid forces hostile to the gospel.

It is not uncommon to find Christians who think that being an apostle was a glorious and prestigious way of life. Some have wished they could have been one of the apostles. Paul made it clear that any recognition associated with this office was costly. There was little glory in being an apostle, and these men lived very uncertain and dangerous lives.

The first part of verse 12 tells us Paul and others (“we”) worked to help pay for some of their expenses (compare Acts 18:1-3; 20:33-34; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8). While this approach does limit a preacher in some ways, it does offer some good things. It puts a minister in the position of having regular contact and evangelistic opportunities with people from the world (the unsaved). Too, it can help diminish accusations that an evangelist is “just preaching for the money.” Some preachers are certainly “in it for what they can get,” but there are many evangelists who really want to do what is right and help people to heaven. “Had the apostle spent the whole of his time in working at his trade of tent-making, he no doubt could have procured for himself a sufficiency of convenient food and raiment. But as he employed the most of his time in preaching, his gains were small; and even these he shared with his assistants, Acts xx 34” (MacKnight, p. 154).

Even though Paul did his best to be a Christian example, he was “*reviled*” (*loidoreo*). This word meant “insulted, blasphemed, or reproached.” The sharpness of this term is seen in the other three places where it is used in the New Testament (Jn. 9:28; Acts 23:4; 1 Pet. 2:23). Since *reviled* is in the present tense, Paul was repeatedly insulted and reproached. When this letter was written he was being persecuted. Today God’s people are also reviled—most often by the world, but sometimes also by fellow church members. We must remember that others have faced this same type of problem and persevered.

Dealing with repeated insults and harassment is never easy. These problems were certainly difficult for Paul, but he “*blessed*” (*eulogeo*), a present tense verb, those who insulted him. Those who worked with Paul (notice the pronoun “we”) also *blessed* those who opposed them and their work. Paul literally did what Jesus taught in Mt. 5:44 and Lk. 6:28. For more information on the word *blessed* see the commentary on 4:12; 10:16; and 14:16.

In addition to the insults, there was “*persecution*” (*dioko*, a common word for persecution and also a present tense verb). This type of opposition comes in many forms, and it can be so bad Christians become bitter or disheartened. Though some are deterred by persecution, Paul “*endured*” it (the KJV says “*suffer it*”). In Eph. 4:2 and Col. 3:13 this same term is translated “forbear.” As a Christian Paul understood that he would be persecuted and he endured the hatred and opposition from both Christians and the unsaved people in the world. No other choice “is lawful; the world thinks that contemptible” (Bengel, 2:187).

4:13: *being defamed, we entreat: we are made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things, even until now.*

Continuing with a series of present tense verbs, Paul now told the Corinthians he was “*defamed*” (*dusphemeo*). A good definition for this word is *slandered*. For some of the other ways *defamed* is used in the New Testament, see the commentary on Acts 2:40. When people slandered him, this apostle resorted to “*entreating*” (*parakaleo*, a present tense verb) his opponents. That is, he spoke to them in a friendly and conciliatory way. Paul lived just as he described in Rom. 12:17-21. He applied Prov. 15:1: “*A soft answer turneth away wrath.*” In the present passage *entreating* contains the idea of trying to *comfort* those who persecuted him.

In verse 13 Paul continued to include others in his experiences (notice the pronoun “we”). He said he and others were “*made as the filth of the world.*” He and his companions were also “*offscouring.*” The word *filth* (*perikatharma*, only used here in the New Testament) described “the rubbish heap or litter gathered when one cleans” (CBL, First Corinthians, p. 305). Gromacki (p. 56) defined it as “the

sweepings and dust from the floor, the rinsings of dirty pans.” *Offscouring* (*peripsema*, only used here in the New Testament) described “what is removed by scouring a filthy object” (CBL, First Corinthians, p. 305). Another definition is “the food particles wiped off dishes and pots by rubbing hard. They were regarded as nothing but dust and garbage!” (Gromacki, p. 56). Since Paul used the present tense (“*we are*” and “*even until now*”), he faced these problems when he wrote this letter.

The Expositor’s Greek Testament (2:802) said *offscouring* and *filth* “were used especially of those condemned criminals of the lowest class who were sacrificed as expiatory offerings, as scapegoats in effect, because of their degraded life. It was the custom at Athens to reserve certain worthless persons who in case of plague, famine, or other visitations from heaven, might be thrown into the sea, in the belief that they would ‘cleanse away,’ or ‘wipe off,’ the guilt of the nation.” “Against this background, Paul portrayed himself as an apostle who was *peripsema*—the hated, ugly scum of the earth on display as a sideshow freak before all the universe...He volunteered, as Christ did, to absorb the curse of the world into himself by his suffering” (CBL, GED, 5:171).

In order to save lost men and women, the apostles were willing to be mistreated and scorned. They permitted others to view them with disgust. They permitted themselves to be treated as filthy trash in an attempt to fulfill the Great Commission. They sacrificed everything they had to help people find Jesus and salvation. While the Corinthians viewed themselves as the spiritual elite, the apostles suffered greatly to help people like them make it to heaven. “The Corinthians were motivated by a selfish, get-all spirit; the apostles and messengers of the gospel were motivated by a selfless, give-all spirit” (CBL, First Corinthians, p. 305).

It does not appear verses 9-13 were designed to criticize the Corinthians. Rather, Paul wanted these Christians to see how out of line and ridiculous their boasting was, so he used sarcasm and irony. Paul turns to a new method of reasoning in the following verses.

4:14-15: *I write not these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 15 For though ye have ten thousand tutors in Christ, yet (have ye) not many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I begat you through the gospel.*

The information in verse 14 may be best understood by an illustration. When a child is corrected, he may feel ashamed and embarrassed. Although this may be how the child feels, the parent’s goal may merely be correction, not embarrassment. A similar thing was true with Paul and the Corinthians. Paul did not write this letter to make them look bad or vent ill feelings about them (his basis for writing was love, not anger). “No father wants to ridicule his children publicly or provoke them to anger (Eph. 6:4)” (Gromacki, p. 57). Paul wrote this letter to correct congregational problems. While his corrections may have injured some feelings (just like children feel embarrassment when they are punished), he did not want to hurt these brethren. The word translated “*admonish*” (“*warn*,” KJV) is a present tense verb and it “carried the intention of shaping character and conduct” (CBL, GED, 4:283). This term (*noutheteo*) is also used in Acts 20:31; Rom. 15:14; Col. 1:28; 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:12, 14; 2 Thess. 3:15. It is a word that tells people they are on the wrong course and it encourages them to return to the right path (it expresses both a warning and an encouragement to do what is right). There was another word that meant to correct by discipline (*paideuo*), but Paul reserved this term for other passages (1 Cor. 11:32; 2 Cor. 6:9). Compare, too, 2 Cor. 7:8-9. Paul viewed these Christians (14b) as “*beloved children*” (the KJV says “*sons*”). Paul’s brethren were precious to him, and he felt an obligation to warn them about their problems as well as propose solutions.

The 15th verse contains an unusual word (*paidagogos*). In the ASV this is translated “*tutors*” and it is rendered “*instructors*” in the KJV (aside from here it is found only in Gal. 3. Readers may consult the commentary on Gal. 3:24-25). This special term has two separate parts (i.e. it is a compound term). The first part of the word (*paidos*) described a boy. The remainder of the term (*agogos*) meant *leading*. Thus, the word literally described *boys* who were *led by someone*. In Paul’s day there were men who guided boys from the age of six to the age sixteen. These men took the designated child to and from school. They also taught, protected, and disciplined the children entrusted to them. For a period of about ten years

children were rarely out of the sight of their *tutor* (*instructor*). Barclay (New Testament Words, p. 207) noted how these men would watch a child's conduct in school and train a boy in morals and manners. "He must see that the boy walked modestly with downcast head in the streets; he must see that he gave place to older people and was becomingly silent in their presence; he must teach him to be well-mannered at table and to wear his clothes with grace."

Many of the Christians at Corinth had received this type of spiritual help, so Paul used this fascinating term to describe what they had experienced. Though we do not know who their *tutors* were, many New Testament saints had watched over and nurtured the Corinthian Christians. Paul said they had "10,000" of these tutors. This is a figurative expression (a hyperbole) to prove the Corinthians had been carefully and patiently taught.

In addition to having many long-suffering instructors, Paul had been like a "*father*" to these disciples. Paul implied there had been only one *father* and this was he. Saying he had been like a dad to the members of this congregation does not conflict with what Jesus said in Mt. 23:9. In that chapter readers find a stinging rebuke directed to Scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 23:2). In giving this rebuke Jesus condemned people for using religious titles like *father*. Paul did not use *father* as a religious title. He used the word to describe his *function*, not his *position*. Paul was like a father who helps bring a child into the world and then helps care for the child. His work as an evangelist helped bring life to those who were lost in sin (Eph. 2:1-2). It was Paul who founded the church at Corinth (Acts 18:8), so he helped bring these people into the kingdom of God (Col. 1:13). Warren Wiersbe (First Corinthians, p. 584) said, "Whenever we share the Gospel with someone and have the joy of leading him to faith in Christ, we become a 'spiritual parent' in his life. This does not give us any special authority over his faith (2 Cor. 1:24), but it *does* create a special relationship that God can use to help him grow."

This point is explicitly made at the end of verse 15: "*for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.*" Paul knew he had been the tool God used to save the Corinthians. While it is true that salvation was and is *through* the gospel and through Christ (15b), Paul planted the seed that resulted in this spiritual life (3:6). The word "*begotten*" (*gennao*) here describes "the influence exerted by one person on another" (Gingrich and Danker, p. 155). For a special study on the word "*gospel*" (*euangelio*), see the commentary on 1 Cor. 15:1-2.

In considering the spiritual help the Corinthians received we may make an observation: conception in the physical and religious realms is not a miracle. When a man and a woman want to conceive a child they come together and use the natural process of sexual intercourse. A similar point is true in the spiritual realm (there is no miracle in the conversion process). Peter affirmed that those who become Christians are *begotten through the gospel* (1 Pet. 1:23). Jude says our salvation is "*common*" (Jude 3—the same process is used by all).

Conversion results from God's word being implanted in the human heart (Jas. 1:21). Jesus said His "words are life" (Jn. 6:63), and the Scriptures are "sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). Faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17). Our obedience to what we hear (1 Pet. 1:22) *purifies our souls* and results in salvation. There are no special feelings, direct intervention of the Holy Spirit, etc. when God converts people. This is why Jesus said the "sower sows the word" (Mk. 4:14) and why He said "preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk. 16:15, KJV). When a man hears the gospel and believes it, he has been conceived (1 John 5:1, ASV). After he repents and is baptized for the forgiveness of his sins (Acts 2:38), the process of the new birth is complete. His spirit is alive (Romans 6:4) and he can walk in newness of life because the old slavery to sin has been broken. He has been redeemed.

4:16-17: *I beseech you therefore, be ye imitators of me. 17 For this cause have I sent unto you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, who shall put you in remembrance of my ways which are in Christ, even as I teach everywhere in every church.*

The Corinthians had three ways to learn about God and His will. These ways included *spiritual gifts*, the *teachings of inspired men*, and *observing the habits of inspired men*. Here Paul specifically spoke about the third form of instruction. Among the first century Christians it was not "do as I say and not as I

do.” It was simply *do as I do*. Outstanding Christians like Paul and Timothy left great examples for local congregations throughout the first century world.

Today we no longer have access to spiritual gifts (see this point discussed in the commentary on chapter 13) and we cannot observe Christians like the apostles. We can, however, rely upon the teachings given by inspired men (this information, as well as a record of Christian examples, is found in the Scriptures). God’s word shows us how to live, worship, be saved, and bring others to Jesus.

When Paul spoke of looking at him for an example to follow he was very, very emphatic. “*Beseech*” is a present tense verb. The present tense is found again in the middle of verse 16 with the verb “*be*” (the idea is “be and continue to be”). Also, *be* is constructed in such a way where it is a command (this is essential). Since some of the Corinthians could have easily twisted this to mean “Rather than following Peter, Apollos, or Christ, be a follower of me—a member of the Paul party instead of the Cephas party or Apollos party” (Willis, p. 126), Paul provided additional information in verse 17 as well as 1 Cor. 11:1.

Paul was not the only one in a position to help these Christians. “*Timothy*” had spent enough time with this apostle to know what he and Christianity were like. Timothy’s father was a Greek (Acts 16:1) and his mother was a Jewess (Acts 16:1). Because of his father’s background he would have been viewed and treated as a Gentile. Even though the Hebrew people would not have recognized or accepted him, Paul cherished this young man and was not ashamed to express his fondness for him. If the Corinthians considered how Paul looked upon Timothy, they would have found a good illustration for how the New Testament breaks down all barriers and is truly a system of love. Timothy was Paul’s “*beloved son*” in the faith.

Paul “*sent*” this young preacher to further help show the brethren at Corinth how to act and perhaps help correct some problems. Timothy was not sent to offer instruction about new things. He was to bring to “*remembrance*” what they already knew. “The text accuses them of forgetfulness” (The Church’s Bible, p. 81). Today a common problem in many places is forgetfulness. It is not that Christians do not know what is right or cannot discover the truth about something. God’s people simply forget. Forgetfulness in the spiritual realm, as this letter well shows, is very dangerous. Notice, too, this point. Paul could have said Timothy was being sent to “teach” the Corinthians. Such a statement may not have gone over too well, especially because Timothy was considered a young man. Saying he was coming to help them *remember* things is a great illustration of graceful speech (Col. 4:6).

“When Paul said he had sent Timothy, the aorist verb (*epempsa*) is not used in its usual past sense but is an ‘epistolary aorist’ meaning that by the time they receive the letter Timothy will have been sent (thus removing any apparent inconsistency with 16:10). Timothy was on his way, traveling by land before Paul wrote his first epistle to the Corinthians, but the letter, traveling by sea, would arrive first” (CBL, First Corinthians, p. 307).

Paul was willing to send Timothy because this young man was “*faithful*” (*pistos*, see the commentary on 1 Cor. 4:2 for information about this word). *Faithful* is a key word in Scripture and it applies to many areas of life. When Timothy came to Corinth these Christians would have another living example to help them live the Christian life, worship, and be involved with the work of the church. The examples of Timothy and Paul strongly imply that God has given mankind a pattern for worship and Christian service and this pattern is to be followed (see 2 Tim. 1:13, ASV). Those who follow God’s pattern build their house upon the rock. Those who do not, build their house upon a foundation of sand (Mt. 7:24-26).

Today we still have the “*ways of Paul*” which he taught in “*every church*” (17b); this information is recorded in the 27 books of the New Testament. The Bible uses the word translated *ways* (*hodos*) to describe the “*way of Cain*” (Jude 11), as well as the “two ways” leading into eternity (Mt. 7:13-14). Some of Paul’s *ways* are recorded in the book of Acts. What Paul said to the Corinthians further shows how all people are to learn from and follow the examples found in the New Testament. “Imitation is the law of the child’s life” (Expositor’s Greek Testament, 2:804).

The word “*imitators*” (*mimetes*) is only used twice in this book (here and 11:1), and in both places the KJV renders it “followers.” Here it means imitating Paul’s “entire life” (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 2:429). Brown (1:491) defined it as “living in accordance with the instructions and conduct of the apostle.” Kittel (4:669) said the “element of obedience is particularly clear” in this verse. In Eph. 5:1

Christians are told to be “imitators of God” (for other interesting verses related to imitation and that have this same term, see 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; Heb. 6:12; 1 Pet. 3:13b). Warren Wiersbe (First Corinthians, p. 585) said, “Children have a way of imitating their parents, either for good or for ill. Researchers tell us that teenagers learn to drink at home and not from their peers. My guess is that other bad habits are learned the same way.” Compare Phil. 4:9.

At the end of verse 17 an additional point is made about following a divine pattern for all facets of the Christian life. The religious matters Paul presented to people were to be taught in “*every church*.” The expression *every church* does not refer to various denominations because there were no denominations in the first century. The very fact that denominations now exist means they all want to believe and practice something different. Just as a single vine has many branches (Jn. 15:5), so there was one church in the first century. This single church consisted of many congregations (see the commentary on Mt. 16:18 in section 22 of the Gospels commentary) that all held to the “faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Christians who really follow the New Testament all have basic uniformity because all are using the same “seed” (the word of God, Lk. 8:11). Paul later made a similar point in 7:17: “*Only, as the Lord hath distributed to each man, as God hath called each, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all the churches.*”

The concept of denominationalism (which is implied by the word “*separations*” in Jude 19) is associated with the sin of “*ungodliness*” in Jude 18 (i.e. it describes something sinful). Denominationalism is not from God. Just as a tree or plant produces only one type of fruit, so Christ’s one church (Mt. 16:18, “church” is singular) means God’s people (the saved) are united in their doctrine, worship, and Christian service. If religious people use different forms of worship and offer different plans for salvation, the differences are not of God. Such actions “go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6) and “transgress the doctrine of Christ” and people “have not God” (2 Jn. 9). Paul made this same point in 1 Cor. 4:17 when he spoke about Timothy bringing to remembrance his ways taught in every place (“*every where in every church*,” KJV). The prevailing idea that different religious groups may coexist and all teach different doctrines with God’s approval is false. Paul also denounced this idea in Gal. 1:6-9. There is “the way of truth” (2 Pet. 2:2), also known as “the right way” (2 Pet. 2:15) and “the way of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:21), and all must follow it.

4:18-19: *Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will; and I will know, not the word of them that are puffed up, but the power.*

In order to grasp the importance of verse 18, it is necessary to consider some of the context. Paul was not actually at Corinth. Neither was he on his way there. In fact, Paul was sending Timothy to the Corinthians (verse 17). The Corinthian Christians were so carnal and fleshly in their thinking they were willing to use Paul’s delay, Timothy’s coming, and perhaps even this letter as tools to attack Paul. Several passages (9:1-3; 2 Cor. 1:17; 10:10; 12:12) indicate there were people at Corinth who opposed Paul’s authority. Perhaps these opponents said things like “Paul is afraid of us so he will not come. Rather than face us on his own, he is sending Timothy in his place. Paul makes big claims but it is all show. All he can do is write letters.”

Paul spoke of some Christians being “*puffed up*” (feeling triumphant). It is very likely these Christians exercised substantial control in the local congregation (they may have been the leaders of the various parties, or they may have been the *guardians* described in verse 15). The word translated *puffed up* (*phusioo*) is used seven times in the New Testament (1 Cor. 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4; Col. 2:18). This term is “rare in non-Christian texts” (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 3:444). Except in 1 Cor. 4:6 and 8:1, this word always has a figurative meaning of *make puffed up, conceited put on airs*” (ibid). Turner (p. 346) defined it as “arrogant self-righteousness.”

Although some attacked Paul and acted as if he would not show his face at Corinth, Paul warned that he was coming if it was God’s will (19a and compare Jas. 4:15). If this trip did occur, Paul said he would see whether or not those who seemed mighty and acted boastful were really as powerful and influential as they thought (compare 2 Tim. 3:5). *Power* seems to describe supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit.

What Paul described is precisely what has taken place throughout the world for more than a century.

Many have claimed and continue to claim the “power of God” works through them. Time and time again the *power* is nothing but talk (people boast and promise but show no power). No one raises the dead, restores severed body parts, or does the other type of indisputable signs recorded in the New Testament. Just as Paul told people they had better be prepared to show their power (19b), such can be our response to false teachers today. At Corinth those who made arrogant claims would either need to *put up* (which they could not do) or *shut up* (this meant repentance). Paul hoped it was God’s will for him to get to Corinth sooner rather than later. Warren Wiersbe (First Corinthians, p. 585) said, “Paul was not like the tolerant modern mother who shouted at her spoiled son, ‘This is the last time I’m going to tell you for the last time!’”

4:20-21: *For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power. 21 What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?*

In the New Testament the “*kingdom*” is a common subject. It is also a popular topic in the religious world. Some still pray for the kingdom to come (Mt. 6:10). While this request was appropriate when Jesus gave the model prayer, it is no longer proper because the kingdom has come (Col. 1:13). For more information on when the kingdom came, see the commentary on Lk. 3:3 in section 7 of the Gospels commentary and the commentary on Mt. 16:19-20 in section 22 of the Gospels commentary. In 1 Cor. 4:20, *kingdom* is simply another way of describing the church (Daniel predicted the establishment of this body and called it a “kingdom” in Dan. 2:44). *Kingdom* and *church* are not always synonyms (compare Mt. 19:12; Mk. 10:24 and 2 Tim. 4:1), but in many places these two terms are interchangeable.

Paul said the church (kingdom) is not a place of “just talk.” It is a place of “power.” If this is understood literally, it would mean there is no teaching in the church. Paul used an ellipsis (he omitted a word to emphasize a point). The complete idea is: The church “is not *only* in word.” It is a spiritual institution that involves word *and* power.

Back in 4:15 the Corinthians were shown how the church is closely tied to the *word* (the “gospel”). Jesus said the gospel was to be preached, and preached to all people (Mk. 16:15). Paul expanded on this information by saying the gospel is God’s power to salvation (Rom. 1:16). In the First Thessalonian letter he said the gospel “*works*” in people (1 Thess. 2:13b). The gospel used to help people find the church is also described as the “word of the kingdom” in Mt. 13:19. By using the word *power* Paul claimed it is wrong for God’s kingdom (the church) to be established by, expanded by, or edified by boisterous speech. It is the gospel that “begets” men (1 Cor. 4:15) and gives them “light” (2 Cor. 4:4). If the gospel is not obeyed, people will be lost (2 Thess. 1:8).

Since the first Christians did not have a completed Bible, Jesus gave certain individuals supernatural signs (Mk. 16:17-18) through the Holy Spirit to “confirm the word” (Mk. 16:20). This was the *power* Paul referred to (compare Heb. 2:3-4). Spiritual gifts allowed Christians to raise the dead, completely and immediately cure those who had never walked (Acts 3:1-7), etc. The duration of these miracles is discussed in the commentary on 1 Cor. 13, and a 24 point contrast between New Testament miracles and the fakery practiced by all those since New Testament times may be found in the commentary on Acts 5:15-16. From now until the end of time, however, the Spirit’s power is exerted through the word of God (Jn. 20:30-31; Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17b).

Paul wanted the Corinthians to consider how he should approach them (verse 21). Should he bring a “*rod*” (an instrument of punishment—the NIV says “*whip*”) or a spirit of *gentleness*? Punishment was probably not what they wanted, but Paul gave them this option and this choice is instructive. It tells us that preachers are sometimes justified in using strong measures to correct God’s people (compare 2 Tim. 4:2). A second choice for the Corinthians was “*love in the spirit of gentleness*.” *Gentleness* (*praotes*) is translated “meekness” in the KJV, and this quality is listed as a fruit of the spirit in Gal. 5:23 (for additional verses that have this term see Col. 3:12, 2 Tim. 2:25 and Tit. 3:2).

These two choices did not mean “Do you want me to come with love or without love?” Even if Paul came to Corinth with a rod, he would have come in and with love. These choices meant “*Do you want me to deal with the problems roughly or gently?*” Paul wanted to know what kind of *spirit* he should have,

and this is demonstrated with the preposition in the Greek text. The thought can be translated: “*in* love” and “*in* a spirit of gentleness.” Should he be prepared to dispense punishment and discipline, or should he be prepared to be “meek and mild”? The way the Corinthians responded to this letter and Timothy’s visit (verse 17) would determine how he reacted. Paul was a man who could and would deal strictly with the unrepentant (Acts 13:8-11).

At the end of verse 21 is the word “*spirit*” (here this word describes attitude, Paul’s disposition or mind set). Paul did not refer to the Holy Spirit. Willis (pp. 129-130) said, “If a congregation wants gentle sermons, the members must be obedient to God’s word; otherwise, they should get strong lessons.” In the case of this congregation, there were multiple problems (including division) that could not be ignored. Paul used about the first fourth of this letter to address the problem of division. Since this chapter ends with a reference to a *rod*, a foundation has been laid for a new subject in chapter 5 (church discipline). Based upon the preceding material, the Corinthians should have been prepared to follow one leader (Jesus) in all things.