

# That Usurper Paul?

<sup>1</sup>Cor 4:1 This is how one should regard us, as **servants of Christ** and **stewards of the mysteries** of God. <sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. <sup>3</sup> But with me it is a very small thing that I should be **judged by you or by any human court**. In fact, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup> For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup> Therefore **do not pronounce judgment before the time**, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

<sup>6</sup> I have applied all these things to **myself and Apollos** for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us **not to go beyond what is written**, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. <sup>7</sup> For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

<sup>8</sup> Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! <sup>9</sup> For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to **the world, to angels, and to men**. <sup>10</sup> **We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.** <sup>11</sup> To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, <sup>12</sup> and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; <sup>13</sup> when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like **the scum of the world**, the refuse of all things.

<sup>14</sup> I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. <sup>15</sup> For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. <sup>16</sup> I urge you, then, be imitators of me. <sup>17</sup> That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. <sup>18</sup> Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. <sup>19</sup> But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I

will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. <sup>20</sup> For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. <sup>21</sup> What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

### 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

## That Usurper Paul

These days, it is commonplace in many fringe conspiracy and New Age circles to hear about how the church was taken over by **evil power-hungry Roman bishops** at Nicaea, taking the *true* (Gnostic) church away from the people and putting it into the hands of the elites so that they could with heavy-handed authoritarianism frighten, abuse, and silence the masses yearning to breathe free into absolute religious submission. But those who claim Christianity wasn't corrupted until the fourth century are way behind the times! They need to catch up on the real conspiracy: the Apostle Paul.

**The Corinthians** may have been the first that we know of to begin questioning his authority, but they were hardly the last. **Thomas Jefferson** wrote, “[In the Bible] I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, and of the

most lovely benevolence: and others again of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism, and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same being. I separate therefore the gold from the dross; restore to [Jesus] the former, & leave the latter to the stupidity of some, and roguery of others of his disciples. Of this band of dupes and impostors, Paul was the great Coryphaeus,<sup>1</sup> and first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

The famous playwright and essayist [George Bernard Shaw](#) accused Paul of replacing Jesus’ social gospel saying, “Now it is evident that two religions having such contrary effects on mankind should not be confused as they are under a common name. There is not one word of Pauline Christianity in the characteristic utterances of Jesus. When Saul watched the clothes of the men who stoned Stephen, he was not acting upon beliefs which Paul renounced. There is no record of Christ’s having ever said to any man: ‘Go and sin as much as you like: you can put it all on me.’ ... There has really never been a more monstrous imposition perpetrated

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<sup>1</sup> The leader of the chorus in an ancient Greek drama, or more generally, a leading figure or chief spokesperson for a group or movement.

<sup>2</sup> [Thomas Jefferson](#), “[Thomas Jefferson to William Short, 13 April 1820](#),” [founders.archives.gov](#).

than the imposition of the limitations of Paul's soul upon the soul of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

Again, another of the great authors, [Leo Tolstoï](#) said, “Since Christ’s time, and down to ours, we find a deviation of doctrine from the foundations laid by Christ. This deviation begins at the time of the apostles, especially with that lover of teaching, Paul.”<sup>4</sup>

[Friedrich Nietzsche](#) unsurprisingly said, “Paul willed the end; therefore he also willed the means ... What he himself didn’t believe was swallowed readily enough by the idiots among whom he spread his teaching.—What he wanted was power; in Paul the priest once more reached out for power—he had use only for such concepts, teachings and symbols as served the purpose of tyrannizing over the masses and organizing mobs. What was the only part of Christianity that Mohammed borrowed later on? Paul’s invention, his device for establishing priestly tyranny and organizing the mob: the belief in the immortality of the soul—that is to say, the doctrine of ‘judgment.’”<sup>5</sup>

And, not to be outdone, [Richard Dawkins](#) the famous atheist writes, “Now, the sado-masochism. God incarnated

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<sup>3</sup> [George Bernard Shaw](#), “[Confusion of Christendom](#),” Preface to *Androcles and the Lion* (London: Constable, 1921), lxxxix-xc.

<sup>4</sup> [Leo Tolstoï](#), *Church and State and Other Essays*, trans. Victor Yarros (Boston: MA, 1891).

<sup>5</sup> [Friedrich Nietzsche](#), *The Antichrist* #42 (1895): 72.

himself as a man, Jesus, in order that he should be tortured and executed in atonement for the hereditary sin of Adam. Ever since Paul expounded this repellent doctrine, Jesus has been worshipped as the redeemer of all our sins.”<sup>6</sup>

This kind of revisionist history, and it can be multiplied exponentially, **attacks the core of our faith**, because the Scripture itself—including not just the letters of Paul, but of Acts and Peter—self-consciously teaches us several facts about **Pauline authority**. First and foremost, he was converted in a direct encounter with **Jesus** Christ himself on a road to murder Christians where the Lord then explicitly called the man to become his apostle to the Gentiles (**Acts 9, 22, 26**). **Peter** himself calls Paul our beloved brother and puts his letters with Scripture (**2Pet 3:15-16**), long after defending him in Jerusalem at the conversion of Cornelius (**Acts 10-11**). The church at Jerusalem accepted him, **Barnabas** taking him to the apostles themselves (**Acts 9:27-28**). The Council of Jerusalem puts him inside the church’s decision making, not outside it (**Acts 15:25-26**). **James** and the elders receive Paul’s missionary report gladly and glorify God for the great work done among the Gentiles (**Acts 21:17-20**).

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<sup>6</sup> **Richard Dawkins**, *The God Delusion* (Bantam London: Press, 2006), 252.

If any of these men, even one of them, are right about Paul, then James, Peter, and the rest of the disciples all have to go. They are all liars and con-artists and must not be accepted as followers, let alone teachers, of Christ. And yet, Peter through his doctrine were commissioned *by Jesus* to be the foundation-stone upon which Jesus would build his church. James was literally Jesus' half-brother! Therefore, Jesus himself has go! This, therefore, is a very serious matter.

## 1 Cor 4: It's Context

These views of Paul have [an original source](#), a spring into which all downstream water flow. This is described historically in [1 Corinthians 1-4](#). The suspicion of Paul's authority at the church in Corinth—*the very church he founded*—will become the founding myth lie of later centuries. It should be obvious from an apologetic point of view that [we must get Paul right](#), on his own terms rather than our own.

Ch. 4 is the end of the long opening discussion about [factionalism](#) that has its only hope for rescue in the foolish cross of Christ. People have divided up the logic of the passage quite differently. Kenneth Bailey sees [vs. 16](#) as the end of the entire argument, with [vv. 17ff](#) belonging to Ch. 5.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [Kenneth Bailey](#), *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

The *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* sees a series of short chiasms that take you up through **vs. 17**.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, Stephen Langton disagreed. Who's that, you ask? Langton was the English cardinal and Archbishop of Canterbury from 1207-28 and he is credited with having first put the Scripture into chapters (verses came later with Robert Estienne in the 16<sup>th</sup> century). Many have followed his lead, as we will do today.

Nevertheless, it's difficult to know exactly how to read this passage best. Mark Taylor has an outline structure connecting it back to chapter three. It has four points which conclude with **vv. 14-21** as a kind of postlude warning to all of **Chs. 1:10-4:21**,

1. The Church, Its Leaders, and God's Fiery Test (3:5-17)
2. The Wisdom of God vs. The Wisdom of the World (Reprise) 3:18-23
3. Faithfulness as the Criterion of Judgment (4:1-5)
4. Application: God's Servants as Paradigms of the Cross (4:6-13)
5. Paul's Warning and Appeal as Their Spiritual Father (4:14-21)<sup>9</sup>

This takes us logically in step-by-step form, which is fine.

It is possible that there could be **a broad chiasm** here, though a couple of the rings are weaker than others:

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<sup>8</sup> Admin, "[1 Corinthians 4.1-17](#)," *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Aug 29, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 28, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014). This is his outline of the book at the beginning. And yes, 5. is set off properly, as it belongs as the fifth point of the four-chapter structure.

- A** (4:1–5) You do not **judge** the stewards. The Lord does. Wait for the time.
- B** (4:6–7) Learn not to go beyond **what is written**. Myself/Apollos. Do not be **puffed up** one against another. What do you have that you did not receive?
- C** (4:8–10) The sarcastic total: already **kings**; we last; **fools/wise, weak/strong, honored/dishonored**.
- C'** (4:11–13) The same claim in the body: **hunger, blows, homelessness, scum of the world** until now.
- B'** (4:14–19) I do not **write** to shame you, but to admonish. Me/Timothy. Some are **puffed up** as though I were not coming. I will come, and I will know not **their word** but their power.
- A'** (4:20–21) The kingdom is not talk but power. **Shall I come with a rod**, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?<sup>10</sup>

If this is right, then it gives us **a very interesting center**, for many people have noticed that it is part of **the most sarcastic tone** in the first four chapters of the letter.<sup>11</sup> The sarcasm and

<sup>10</sup> A modification of **Christine Miller**, “[1 Corinthians 4, The Culture of Honor](#),” A Little Perspective (May 8, 2012):

- A** 4:1–5 — Do not **judge** the stewards before the time; the Lord is the judge
- B** 4:6a — Learn from us not to go beyond what is **written**
- C** 4:6b–7 — Do not be **puffed up** one against another
- D** 4:8 — You are already full, rich, and reigning as **kings**
- E** 4:9 — God has exhibited us **apostles last**, like men **sentenced to death**, a **spectacle**
- X** 4:10 — We are fools / you are wise; we are weak / you are strong; you are honored / we are dishonored
- E'** 4:11–13 — To this hour we **hunger, beaten, homeless, treated as the scum** and off-scouring of all things
- D'** 4:14–17 — I write as **your father**, not to shame but to admonish; imitate me; Timothy is coming
- C'** 4:18–19 — Some are **puffed up** as though I were not coming
- B'** 4:20 — The kingdom of God is not in **word** but in power
- A'** 4:21 — Shall I come with **a rod or with love** and a spirit of gentleness?

<sup>11</sup> See **Matthew Pawlak**, Sarcasm in Paul’s Letters, Society for New Statement Studies 182, Ed. Edward Adams (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 167–70.

guiltive nature of the argument in this chapter acts like a hinge at the climax of everything before it. What comes before it is the Corinthian's "already-reigning" pretension that they have a right to judge Paul or anyone else they feel like, while everything after this shows the apostle's actual condition and then turns the same language of judgment and being "puffed up" back on the church.<sup>12</sup>

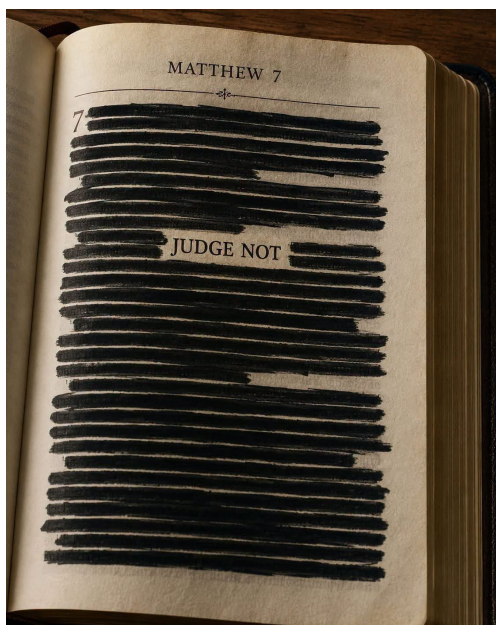
## 1 Cor 4:1-7 Get Out of the Judge's Seat (A, B)

We've all heard what Jesus said, "Judge not, lest you be judged" (Matt 7:1). These words have been some of the most abused in the entire NT.<sup>13</sup> Way back in high school there was this particular atheist girl who any time I told her about

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<sup>12</sup> *Physioō* ("puffed up") in 4:6 and 4:18 functions as a lexical inclusio that also links the chapter to 5:2.

<sup>13</sup> This meme showed up on Facebook this week. I thought it was perfect: "How liberal Christians interpret the Bible."



how Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the life would always throw his own words right back at me. And how many millions have used these words from Jesus' own mouth to try and convince Christians never to make the claims about Jesus that he himself made?

Is Jesus saying never make any judgments about right and wrong, truth and lies, good and bad? Of course not. This comes in a sermon about individual ethics towards people who are *hypocritically* judging the speck in their brother's eye while failing to look at the log in their own. But this same Jesus also said, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (John 7:24). The good news is that the Corinthians did not make the same mistake about Matthew 7:1. The bad news is that they did make the mistake about John 7:24.

1 Cor 4:1-7 show us that the Corinthians had actually set themselves up in the place of God, jumping up into the bench that only he can fill, making judgments against his servants. Paul has already hinted at what they were doing. In 2:14-15 he says *the spiritual man judges all things, and is himself judged by no one*. Now, in 4:3 he tells them, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by your or by any human court.” In other words, their judgment of him

was *not* a spiritual judgment, for they were not acting spiritually, but carnally—like the world.

Let's back up and ask the question. **What exactly was their judgment against Paul?** They were not judging *his salvation*, but rather they were measuring him by their own scale of what made a public figure worthy of following. **They judged his speech, his strength of presence and his honor.** Thus, many of them wouldn't follow him and they began to form factions, dividing up the Apostles among themselves, one following Paul, another Apollos, another Peter, even though they all taught the very same thing. This is precisely why Paul said that he did not come to them with lofty speech or wisdom, but in weakness and in fear and much trembling (**1:17, 2:1-5**). He looked low to them. He was not of eloquent speech. He worked with his hands (**4:12**). And some thought he would never even come back (**4:18-19**). This was completely **worldly behavior**, the kind that befits *American Idol*, not a church of Jesus Christ.

Paul sets them straight right away. **"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God"** (**1Cor 4:1**). Amazingly, **both of these points** were **denied** in our opening quotes. They said he was power hungry and that his teachings bore no resemblance to

those of Jesus. Paul says exactly the opposite. Those are his own words, something many skeptics of Paul constantly ignore because they don't fit the narrative. I mean, why let a man speak for himself when it's so much easier to silence him as you slander him?

These words show you **two foundational truths** about who the Apostles of Jesus actually were. They were not looking to lord it over others. Rather, they were *servants* of the very people they came to rescue from sin and death. Servants are those who perform menial tasks for someone else. This is what kind of men founded the church.

In this case, they are servants *of Christ*. It is interesting that he does not choose a word like *doulos* (servant/slave, you belong to a master) or *deaconois* (you do a service). He chooses *hypēretas*, a word that **necessitates a superior whose charge you are under**. They are aides, clerks, officers. He couldn't use *doulos* here, because that would only feed their lack of respect for Paul as a slave. And *deaconois* only says they serve, not whom they serve.

As servants of Christ, they are also **stewards**. A steward is a person who manages property, finances, or other affairs for someone else, looking after passengers and provisions. A steward is entrusted with someone else's stuff. **The steward**

of Gondor was not the king. Denethor began to act as if he was. Paul knows he is not! But he also knows he has been entrusted with **very specific instructions**—namely, to guard and proclaim the contents of *the mysteries*. These refer to Gospel message that was hidden in ages past (2:7) but revealed through Christ's First Coming for our hope and salvation. Christ was crucified, the *archons* put him to death not knowing it would be their undoing, and now this message saves you from their tyranny. This the message the church was founded upon, not power, but suffering.

Paul and all the others **take this task extremely serious** knowing, “**Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful**” (4:2). This is a foreshadowing that **judgment** is coming for the Apostles, which is precisely what he already told them in Ch. 3. But it is foreshadowing because he is about to unleash on them why the Corinthians must not overstep their own authority in this matter. This is a warning to all who would judge the founders of Christianity.

This is all a far cry from what is proclaimed about Paul from skeptics in our days, and also what was being said about him by the Corinthians. For as I have shown you, Paul knows that **they are judging him**, just as **human courts** have also held trials over Paul (4:3). For we know from Acts that

Paul has already stood before courts in **Corinth** itself, before Gallio (**Acts 18:12-17**), not to mention **Philippi** (**Acts 16:19-24, 35-39**), **Thessalonica** (**17:5-9**), and **Athens** (**17:19-34**). Some were hearings. Some were beatings. Do you really think Paul is losing sleep because the Corinthians are now saying that he isn't worthy of being taken seriously? No. But he is still angry with righteous anger. **Vs. 3** is the first sign that Paul's stinger is about to come out.

“**Human court**” is literally *anthrōpinēs hēmeras*, “**human day**,” and it is deliberately contrasted with *another Day*! “**It is the Lord who judges me**” (**1Cor 4:4c**). This refers back to the Day of the LORD, the Day of Judgment that he discussed in the previous chapter. Now, Paul knows he's not guilty of anything. He says, “**For I am not aware of anything against myself**” (**4a**). This means that he has introspected to see if in fact perhaps they are right about him. Has he not been a good servant and steward? That's quite natural and all self-conscious souls who have a conscience do this naturally when people go after them.

But, just because he doesn't think he has done anything worthy of being judged doesn't mean he is acquitted (**4b**). *He* is not judging himself (**3b**). Rather, he knows **the Lord is the one who will judge him** and so he does all things in the

light of this inevitable judgment that is coming for him and for all. Do you act with your life as though this were true of you?

For the first time since he first began talking about the Judgment Day, he suddenly **turns this on the Corinthians**. But be careful how you read this. It can be part of the same hermeneutical mine-field as Ch. 3. Recall that last time we talked about how **people badly take Ch. 3's going through the fire** completely out of context, bringing great harm to Christians in the process. That doesn't mean Judgment Day is *only* for Apostles and teachers. Nevertheless, for the most part, Paul stays there. His focus is still not really on the Corinthians—save for their inability to judge properly. It is on his own ministry and that of the other apostles and their authority from Christ.

In light of the fact that Paul will not judge himself because he knows that Jesus will do that, “**Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God**” (4:5). How should we understand this? Same as last time!

He does not want the Corinthians judging what even he himself can't finally judge—his own (that is Paul's own) heart and motives and actions. That job belongs **only to Jesus**, for only the Lord fully and finally knows **the heart**. The things now hidden in darkness refers to Paul and the other teachers (like Apollos') motives, not the Corinthians. He hasn't changed subjects from the previous chapter. Each one who receives his commendation from God then still refers to those Apostles and teachers of Corinth. Calvin said it well long ago, “**You now, O Corinthians, as if you had the adjudging of the prizes, crown some, and send away others with disgrace... You do that before the time—before it has become manifest who is worthy to be crowned.**”<sup>14</sup>

This doesn't mean there is no application for the Corinthians about Judgment Day, however. For if they are judging Paul, who has only ever done what Jesus sent him to do, then **they are standing in the place of King himself** and this is not the kind of thing you want to have on your hands when Judgment Day comes for you. Don't do **the opposite error** on this, of course, saying that leaders should never be questioned. That isn't at all what Paul is saying. And that's precisely why he has examined himself and that there is

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<sup>14</sup> Calvin on 1 Cor 4:5.

nothing he knows about that will cause him to be guilty on Judgment Day. The great temptation is always to make passages say more than they say.

Vv. 6-7 do not begin a new subject. “I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” What are “these things” that he has applied to himself and Apollos? His entire servant-stance: the planting of the field, the building of the temple, being a steward of the mysteries. He has been talking about workmen waiting for the Lord to judge them. “*Stop judging us as being opposed to one another. We are not your trophies. We are servants, that you may learn from us.*”

“Not going beyond what is written” refers to the OT quotations he has giving them about God destroying the wisdom of the wise (1:19; Isa 29:14); only boasting in the Lord (1:31; Jer 9:23-24), about the centrality of the cross that no eye has seen (2:9; Isa 64:4), not being able to understand the mind of the Lord (2:16; Isa 40:13), and how the Lord catches the wise in their craftiness (3:19; Job 5:13) and knows the

thoughts of the wise, that they are futile (3:20; Ps 94:11). Those were given precisely to keep them from being puffed up in their lack of discernment and factionalism.

Vs. 7 now ends this section with three rhetorical questions which attack their pride. “For who sees anything different in you?” or better, “What makes you different?” Who decided that you sit higher than your brother? No one. No me. Not Apollos. “What do you have that you did not receive?” The Gospel, your faith, your teachers ... it all came to you. You didn’t invent Paul. You didn’t produce Apollos. Jesus sent them to you. You did not lay the foundation; they did. “If they you receive it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” That goes right back to their boasting. Only boast in the Lord. Don’t go beyond what is written.

## 1 Cor 4:8-13 Coronation and Condemnation (C, C’)

Perhaps you can hear in these questions a kind of exasperation? Paul’s tone is starting to change. This becomes abundantly clear in vv. 8ff. “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might

share the rule with you!” These are three boasts now put into the mouths of the Corinthians that match the three questions he just asked:

| Verse 7                                    | Verse 8                           |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Who makes you different?                   | Already you are full.             |
| What do you have that you did not receive? | Already you have become rich.     |
| Why boast as if you did not receive it?    | You have become kings without us. |

This is a way of telling them that *they think they’ve already arrived*. This is their personal coronation boast. And it is *deeply sarcastic*. This needs a brief detour, not the least reason being that we will come back to this kind of speech time and again throughout this letter.

First of all, *what is sarcasm?* The dictionary defines it as form of speech where you say the opposite of what you mean to mock, insult, or show annoyance. But it doesn’t always have to be negative in its purpose, as many suppose. It can be used to wound, *correct*, or *unmask*. And none of those are necessarily bad things.

But someone might say, *sarcasm is something that a holy God would ever use*. God would never be sarcastic! Sarcasm is a sin. A lot of evangelicals bristle at sarcasm. Some of that comes from the habit in recent decades of treating *Jesus as*

endlessly gentle and earnest, like their girlfriend, in a culture that says you can never upset anyone, so anything with an edge sounds unchristlike. Some of it comes from turning **Ephesians 4:29** (“**Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths**”) into a rule against ever offending anyone. Some of it is a fair fear: pulpits have used sarcasm to humiliate people, so the safer move feels the need to ban it altogether. To paraphrase the sarcasm of Martin Luther when people say that men have abused sarcasm. *Men have also abused women, should we therefore abolish women? Men have worshiped the stars. Should we then pluck them out of the sky?*<sup>15</sup>

Scripture does not share this fear. **Elijah** told the prophets of Baal to yell louder because their god might be in the bathroom. **Paul** is the one who also wished the Judaizers would emasculate themselves. **Jesus** called Herod a fox and the Pharisees whitewashed tombs.

Finally, **how do we know** that this is sarcasm? Paul tells the Corinthians they had already become kings. He does not actually think they have. Here he says they are full, rich, and kings but earlier he had said that when they were called they were not wise by human standards, powerful, or of noble birth (**1:26**)—the exact opposite. Add now the fact that he

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<sup>15</sup> **Roland H. Bainton**, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Pierce and Smith, 1950), 214.

says, “Without us you have become kings” with the very next phrase, “And would that you did reign.” So are they are reigning or aren’t they? These are clearly contradictory and necessitate sarcasm.

This is not Paul stooping beneath Christ’s dignity. It is the Spirit telling the truth through the Apostle in a form that their own pride cannot easily dodge. The sarcasm “is meant precisely to bring them back down to earth.”<sup>16</sup> While sarcasm does not work on everyone (because it isn’t the language they personally speak), sometimes, the only way you can get across to people like that is to speak their own language. The language of pride and jealousy and factions demanded it.

The sarcasm continues in vs. 9. “For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.” He brings up the gladiator arena or “theater” (“spectacle” = *theatron*), something they were well acquainted with. If vs. 8 were sincere, vs. 9 would be odd. Kings do not watch their founders marched out for execution! Vs. 9 is what their self-coronation looks like from the floor of the arena! The crowd have taken their seats. God

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<sup>16</sup> Pawlak, 168.

has put the apostles at the end of the procession and reserved for them the role of those condemned to die to entertain the crowd.

The crowd in this case is **much larger than the arena in Corinth**. It consists of **the world, angels, and men**. The world is this age, human wisdom, and the like. Men are the Corinthians, but they are only taking up a single section in this arena. Angels are mentioned because they, too, are watching. Loyal and fallen! In fact, we've already seen how they didn't understand the plan of God and so put Christ to death as archons. In **6:3** he will say we judge angels. In **11:10** he will mention them again when their public worship goes awry. The angels make the sarcasm cosmic in scope.

**Vs. 10**, I believe, continues it. **"We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute."** **Does Paul really think** they are wise in Christ when he's been telling them for three full chapters how foolish they are, like infants, unable to make even the most basic discerning judgments? Of course not. Does he really believe they are strong, or is that their own opinion of themselves? No, he's using the sarcasm of what they are to show, though what he and Apollos really are what they should become.

**Vs. 11-13** (the chiastic second half center of 8-10) continues this. “To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands” (11-12a). Doing this work as servants of Christ **has cost them everything**. This is opposite of the name-it-and-claim-it, health-and-wealth gospel. And Christ demands this be the case for them, precisely so the kinds of attacks we see at Corinth or at the beginning of this sermon should have no actual weight. The church of Jesus Christ was founded by the opposite kind of men from what Nitsche and Jefferson claimed. And the Corinthians knew is, which is what made them so skeptical of Paul in all their worldly wisdom. For **the wisdom of the world does not say** someone should be willing to go hungry and thirsty, in rags, without homes, working two or three jobs for the sake of others if that’s what the need is. It says the opposite.

It continues but now with **a less harsh tone**, “When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.” Until very recently, an acquaintance of mine from Denver Seminary had a church for the last 20 years in Denver’s Lincoln Park called *Scum of the Earth*. Theirs was a ministry very much like Paul

is describing of himself here. And of all the modern church name fads out there, this one **stands alone** in my thinking as a great one. It combines the good Reformed doctrine of total depravity with the essential counter argument that the Gospel is for the rich and to make you rich. Instead, it causes transformation inside of you, not outside, so that you begin acting like your Master, Jesus, who commanded us to bless when reproached and to go the extra mile when persecuted, things found in the Sermon on the Mount just prior to the “judging” verse.

## 1 Cor 4:14-21 Your Father Is Coming (B’, A’)

This takes us to the last section: **vv. 14-21**. Everything now **unfolds backwards** onto the Corinthians, based on this central movement of sarcasm that the Corinthians aren’t who they think they are.

**Vs. 14**, “I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.” Here we learn **the purpose of that sarcasm**. **He isn’t writing to shame them**, that is to somehow win the honor game or make them look small in front of him. Though, it must be said that he will later say he is writing to shame them twice

(6:5; 15:34). But here, he's trying to put their minds straight. *Nouthetōn* (admonish) is literally *nous* (“mind”) + *tithēmi* (“to put”) = “to put in mind.” Jay Adams named his *nouthetic* counseling—a form of counseling using Scripture as the correction, from this word. Paul is doing it through the Word, through the Gospel, and through his sarcastic rebuke of their sin.

He does this, importantly, “as my beloved children.” In the NT, the children of the covenant (the new covenant) are not biological, but spiritual—those who have been regenerated and profess faith. This is one of many Scriptures that teaches this. He had already called them infants (3:1), but now he says they are *his* children.

This sets up his next words, which return to sarcasm for a phrase. “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers...” (15a). “Countless” (*muri-ous*) means “ten thousand” and it is obviously overstating the point, because it is a jab at how many factions there may actually be. These “guides” (*paidagōgous*) are also not a complement, as a pedagogue is a slave who walked the child to school. Paul isn't a slave to the Corinthians. Neither is Apollos or Peter or Timothy. He resents that idea.

Instead, Paul reminds them, that even though they have countless guides, “**you do not have many fathers**” (15b). I remember someone saying that the idea in the older church that a pastor should be called “father” is blasphemous, and that’s why most protestants don’t use that terminology. There’s likely a point to that. And no, Paul is not here giving permission for “father” to be an office of the church. Nevertheless, he is remembering that **he is a kind of father** to them. Not one who replaces the Heavenly Father, but on a human level, he is the one who brought the gospel to them. Apollos didn’t do that. Peter didn’t do that. Timothy didn’t do that. Paul did. And as such, he is rightly more than any other—their father.

But father how? “**I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.**” Not autonomously. Not as a usurper to the heavenly father. But **as a servant steward** of Jesus Christ himself, in Christ. And through the means God used to give them birth—the Gospel, the seed through which the Holy Spirit gave birth to them.

Why does he tell them this about his being their father? Because his being their father ties directly back to his being reviled, persecuted, slandered, the scum of the earth, the refuse of all things. It ties to him being hungry, thirsty, poorly

dressed, buffeted and homeless, and laboring with his own hands. He did *these things as their father*, not just as “some guy.”

If the father is like this, *what they ought they be like?* He tells them the obvious answer, “*I urge you, then, be imitators of me*” (16). Imitators how? In all the things he has said about himself. Be *humble*, not prideful. Be willing to *sacrifice* for others, not those who have to constantly take from others. Be people who are of *low repute*, not those who need the esteem of everyone in the city. Be people who *bless, endure, and entreat* rather than those who revile, persecute, and slander. That’s the obvious application come home to roost in their nest that they’ve made for themselves.

*Verses 17-21* are a kind of addendum that rightly belong both to this *and* to what follows. They are a hinge, a segue. We will think about them in light of what we’ve just seen.

“*That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church*” (17). When Paul left, he sent *Timothy* back to them to teach them all of these things, because they needed to keep learning them and because he had to continue on his mission. He had tarried in

Corinth already 18 months. More people needed to hear the gospel.

Timothy, as we know from those letters and from Acts was a young man when he came to Paul. He had a believing mother and grandmother and he ended up pastoring the church at Ephesus, the very place Paul is likely writing this very letter from. Timothy had been with Paul since the moment they first arrived in Corinth (Acts 18:5). So they both knew him and respected him.

But some took this sending as a sign that they would never see Paul again. And this clearly led to their decreasing opinion of Paul. “Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you” (18). Their arrogance says that they didn’t believe Paul when he said he would return. Their arrogance contributed to this disdain of Paul.

So he sets them straight. “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power” (19). I do confess that I believe Paul’s sarcasm has turned into righteous anger now. He’s ticked. These fools think they all-that with their talk against Paul. Let’s see how much power they have to say it to my face when I return. Then we’ll separate the men from the boy.

But just as quickly as his dander rises, he simmers down, for he is still their father and though he might get upset with his children for bad behavior, he still loves them desperately. “For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (20-21). He doesn’t want to come to them with a rod. That would be the kind of judgment they deserve and which they are themselves meeting out at him in the first verses of his chapter.

Instead, he would much rather come in a spirit of gentleness and love, knowing that this Spirit-inspired letter did its gospel work in their lives and set them straight, cutting their pride off at the feet, humbling their legs at the knees, lowering their vanity at the neck—making them prostrate before their holy God and his servants who came only to help raise them in the faith which alone is able to save them from the very world they are still trying so desperately to be like.

## Conclusion

Jefferson, Nietzsche, Shaw, Tolstoy, and Dawkins are all acting out the story that the Corinthians were already rehearsing: *Paul is the man who stole the church. He is hungry for*

*power. He invented a religion Jesus never taught. Chapter 4 will not let that story continue to be told. The play is over. Go home. The man they call a usurper calls himself a servant of Christ and a steward of mysteries that were never his. He will not even close the case on himself. He waits for the Lord. The people who look like usurpers in this chapter are not in Ephesus writing a letter. They are in Corinth, up on the bench, handing out crowns before Judgment Day even arrives.*

That is why the tone turns *sarcastic*. “*Already you are full. Already you are rich. Without us you have become kings.*” He does not believe it. God has put the apostles last, like men condemned to die, a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. If anyone was grabbing a throne, it was not the hungry, beaten, homeless preacher who worked with his hands and blessed when he was cursed. It was the church that wanted a king who looked like Corinth. Paul does not write that to win an honor fight. He writes it as a father putting something back into their minds. They have ten thousand handlers. They do not have many fathers. He became their father through the gospel. Therefore imitate him — not the city, not the faction, not the man with the louder voice.

Timothy is already on the way to remind them of those ways, the same ways Paul teaches in every church. Some are puffed up as if the father were gone for good. He is not. He will come, if the Lord wills, and he will not weigh their malicious mouths. He will weigh power. The kingdom of God does not consist in talk. It never did. That is as true in a modern conspiracy podcast about Nicaea as it was in a living room in Corinth.

So the chapter [ends where it began](#), only the seats have changed. They climbed into the Judge's seat. Paul asks what they will do when he walks through the door to mount the bench. A rod, or love and a spirit of gentleness? The rod is what they deserve. Gentleness is what a father hopes to bring, like the father of the Prodigal after his son comes back to his senses. The only question left is whether they will come down off the bench, give the gavel back to the Lord, and become the kind of children they really are in Christ again before he arrives.

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