



1 Corinthians - Chapter Four

- II 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21 - Divisions over Christian Preachers (continues/concludes)
- II.b 1 Corinthians 1:18-4:21 - God's wisdom answers the problem (continues/concludes)
- II.b.ii 1 Corinthians 3:1-4:21 - God's wisdom applied to Apollos, Paul, and the Corinthians (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

This chapter has two key themes. The first describes the role of the apostles in teaching and guiding the church. Paul describes himself, Apollos and the others as being stewards of the church, teaching the people from the oracles of God and unpacking some of the mysteries that surround the Gospel. He states that apostles should not be judged by the people for they are enduring many hardships for the services they are providing, which remains an incomplete work until the Lord returns in judgement.

Paul concludes the chapter by claiming parental rights over the church, which require him not just to teach and guide in love, but also to admonish those who are asserting their authority over the church due to their arrogant pride.

II.b.ii.2 1 Corinthians 4:1-13 - The Ministry of the Apostles

Paul describes the way the Corinthians should view those who bring the Word of God to them, advising them that they should not accept anything that is not taught according to biblical principles. He states quite clearly that no one should judge the apostles in this age, as they will be judged by God in the age yet to come.

Paul continues by describing how privileged the Corinthian believers were because of the gifts they have received, especially when compared to the hardships experienced by the apostles and others who were serving them; for they were experiencing a range of hardships in order to serve the church and God.

¹ Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.

1 Corinthians 4:1

Think of us in this way. The Corinthians had their own perception of what a Christian teacher should be like and their preference was for them to be like the sophists of the day, with their fine rhetoric and witty speeches. Paul encouraged them to take a different perspective of people like him.

Servants of Christ is a term Paul uses in his opening address to Philippi: <<*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons*>> (Philippians 1:1).

Stewards of God's mysteries. Apostles and teachers like Paul are not owners of the spectacular storehouse of God's great riches. What is required of them is simply that they should be faithful with what has been entrusted to them. They are tasked to manage the resources, interpreting the mysteries and releasing potential in people through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Mysteries. Since Paul uses the plural here, as he does also in 1 Corinthians 13:2 and 14:2, he probably has in mind not only the Gospel itself: <<*Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel*>> (Ephesians 6:19), but also other truths that God has revealed. For example: <<*So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in*>> (Romans 11:25), <<*Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed*>> (1 Corinthians 15:51), <<*and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*>> (Ephesians 3:3-6), <<*This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church*>> (Ephesians 5:32), and: <<*I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself*>> (Colossians 2:2).

A mystery, Greek *mystērion*, in Paul's letters is something that people, in their human weakness, could not understand unless God graciously revealed it to them, something he had always done: <<*Then Daniel went to his home and informed his companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions with the rest of the wise men of Babylon might not perish. Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven*>> (Daniel 2:17-19), <<*but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen at the end of days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay*>> (Daniel 2:17-19).
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in bed were these>> (Daniel 2:28), and: <<*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ*>> (Ephesians 1:7-9), but now Paul, and others like him, are authorised to explain these mysteries.

² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy.

1 Corinthians 4:2

It is required of stewards. Those called to ministry are given a task to be undertaken with due diligence; it is not something they can ever neglect as they will be judged for their actions: <<*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*>> (James 3:1).

Stewards, should be found trustworthy. Elsewhere, Paul provides the qualities he expects of those who are called to ministry: <<*Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience*>> (1 Timothy 3:8-9), and: <<*For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain*>> (Titus 1:7).

³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself.

1 Corinthians 4:3

Judged by you. Some of the Corinthians, perhaps followers of Apollos or Cephas, probably spoke disparagingly of Paul, especially of his speaking ability: <<*For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power*>> (1 Corinthians 1:17), <<*And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power*>> (1 Corinthians 2:3-4), and: <<*I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters*>> (2 Corinthians 10:9), thinking they were able to judge his spiritual effectiveness. It is widely believed that Paul was not a fluent speaker, perhaps having a stammer.

Paul had many experiences of standing before a human court, including the Sanhedrin: <<*While Paul was looking intently at the council he said, 'Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God'*>> (Acts 23:1); before the Roman governor: <<*When the governor motioned to him to speak, Paul replied: 'I cheerfully make my defence, knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation*>> (Acts 24:10); before the king: <<*I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am to make my defence today against all the accusations of the Jews, because you are*

especially familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews; therefore I beg of you to listen to me patiently>> (Acts 26:2-3); and also before Cæsar: <<*Now if I am in the wrong and have committed something for which I deserve to die, I am not trying to escape death; but if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can turn me over to them. I appeal to the emperor*>> (Acts 25:11).

I do not even judge myself. Although there is always a requirement for self-evaluation, critical appraisal and prayer, to take time to sit in judgement on oneself would be rather self-indulgent and would serve little purpose.

⁴ I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

1 Corinthians 4:4

It is the Lord who judges me. Paul's faithfulness to God allowed him to keep a clear conscience: <<*Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience towards God and all people*>> (Acts 24:16), and: <<*Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God – and all the more towards you*>> (2 Corinthians 1:12). Other servants of God also had kept their consciences clear, including: <<*Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honourably in all things*>> (Hebrews 13:18). However, Paul realises that he is not equipped to claim his own innocence and speaks honestly: but I am not thereby acquitted.

The other key point to the phrase it is the Lord who judges me is that God will one day pass the final judgement. This is not just because of the evil and wickedness that is in the world, but also because the world needs to be restored for its intended purpose. God would not be just and holy if he did not judge the world in the way the bible indicates that he will.

⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgement 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 commendation from God.

1 Corinthians 4:5

Do not pronounce judgement before the time. Paul is clearly saying that the Corinthians, and by implication everyone else, should not pass judgement on what is essentially a work in progress, but should know that a time is coming when righteous judgement will be passed upon all of mankind. The Corinthians, with their new found wisdom in Christ and their additional wisdom from worldly philosophies, thought they could be critical of Paul's teaching. When judgement comes, Paul may well be found to have fallen short, but it is certain that those passing judgement on him will find there are issues that they too were guilty of!

When the Lord comes he will judge all of humanity: <<*It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'See,* New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised 1Corinthians4-4

the Lord is coming with tens of thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgement on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him’>> (Jude 14-15). In the meantime, believers are not to judge others: <<Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven>> (Luke 6:37), and: <<There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?>> (James 4:12).

When Jesus does return in judgement he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness. This had been revealed of God: <<*He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light*>> (Job 12:22), and the Lord will also disclose the purposes of the heart, i.e. people’s innermost secrets: <<*You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance*>> (Psalm 90:8). This had been prophesied over the infant Jesus: <<*Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too’>> (Luke 2:34-35). Elsewhere, Paul explains the process of judgement for both Jews and Gentiles: <<*All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all*>> (Romans 2:12-16).*

Then each one will receive commendation from God. For many Greek writers, judgement comes as either praise or blame. The idea of this clause shows that:

1. Although the Church is a functioning cohesive whole, the works and hearts of people will be judged individually by God.
2. It is God and not man who will decide in the end what the consequences are; how blameworthy or praiseworthy people’s actions and motivations have been.

Elsewhere it is demonstrated that there will be commendation for some and reproach for others. Refer to the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30.

⁶ I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, ‘Nothing beyond what is written’, so that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another.

1 Corinthians 4:6

I have applied all this. Paul has crafted his argument well in order to show that the problem was not with Apollos or Paul, or indeed Peter and others but was with

the Corinthians themselves. They had taken their new found Christian faith and coupled it with their wisdom from worldly teachers, believing this provided them with a status that no one could challenge. Yet Paul does challenge them.

Paul emphasises the importance of not going beyond what is written in Scripture, as exemplified by his five quotations up to this point: Isaiah 29:14 in 1 Corinthians 1:19; Jeremiah 9:23-24 in 1 Corinthians 1:31; Isaiah 64:4 in 1 Corinthians 2:9; Job 5:13 in 1 Corinthians 3:19; and Psalm 94:11 in 1 Corinthians 3:20.

The purpose of these scriptures was to teach them, i.e. so that you may learn through us, to help the church to avoid the trap that many of them had fallen into. Some had become arrogant and prideful, whereas Paul states that his purpose was that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another.

⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

1 Corinthians 4:7

This set of rhetorical questions expresses in a nutshell the central theological truth that the Corinthians, in their divisiveness, seem to have forgotten that all their abilities, opportunities, and blessings are from God; therefore, they should not boast but praise God with a thankful heart.

What do you have that you did not receive? If Christians repeatedly ask this of themselves, it will produce deep humility and thanksgiving. They will come to realise that everything they have was given to them through God's grace and mercy: <<*John answered, 'No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven'*>> (John 3:27).

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!

1 Corinthians 4:8

Already you have all you want! This can be taken in two ways:

1. Since they had accepted the Gospel and were recipients of God's grace, they had become rich in everything they would ever need or hope for.
2. Due to their elevated self-opinion that Paul has criticised in this letter, the Corinthians had become arrogant and conceited, something the Laodiceans would also be accused of: <<*For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see*>> (Revelation 3:17-18).

You have become kings! Paul is speaking colourfully and ironically of the Corinthians' haughtiness. They did believe, as did some of the philosophers of the

day, that they were complete in their knowledge and wisdom, making them superior to all others around them.

⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals.

1 Corinthians 4:9

Exhibited us like men sentenced to death. Paul is probably thinking of the Roman triumphal processions that were a feature of returning armies, fresh from another great victory. In such processions captured enemy soldiers were paraded through the streets before being publicly executed or sold into slavery. Alternatively, he may be thinking of gladiators condemned to die in an arena, yet Paul sees this more as being part of the victory parade: <<*But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him*>> (2 Corinthians 2:14), and he also writes using the image in a different way: <<*He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it*>> (Colossians 2:15).

Paul's contrast is clear. The Corinthians had placed themselves on a pedestal with their arrogance and pride. They thought the apostles should be up there with them but the reality is quite different. Paul is not complaining about the position he found himself in. He is making a point about the realities of life.

¹⁰ We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, ¹² and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

1 Corinthians 4:10-13

We are fools for the sake of Christ. Paul's tone reaches the point of sarcasm which makes the illustration that much clearer and should have left the readers in no doubt concerning their errors. Measured by the royal standards of the Corinthians (v.8), Paul's apostolic calling has involved foolishness, weakness, and suffering. This is reflected again in Paul's other letter to Corinth, refer to 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, 4:7-12, 4:16-18, 11:22-33, 12:9, and 13:4; it is also reported to the church in Philippi. Refer to Philippians 1:12-18.

To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless. Paul had known from the outset that life as an apostle would be hard: <<*But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name'*>> (Acts 9:15-16). Paul would not be disappointed, with this upcoming passage being written about halfway through his ministry: <<*Are they ministers of*

Christ? I am talking like a madman – I am a better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches>> (2 Corinthians 11:23-28), and: <<Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted>> (2 Timothy 3:10-12).

The work of our own hands. Although Paul's philosophy was that those who worked for the church deserved to be cared for by the church, it was a right he chose not to take up, for he did not want to give a false impression about his reasons for working in the way he did: <<*You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God*>> (1 Thessalonians 2:9), and: <<*For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate*>> (2 Thessalonians 3:7-9).

When slandered, we speak kindly. Paul answers false accusations, as he had in Philippi: <<*But Paul replied, 'They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves'*>> (Acts 16:37), lest falsehood be established as truth in the public mind and the reputation of the Gospel be damaged.

We have become like the rubbish of the world. Paul is not complaining about his situation. He simply provides an honest evaluation of the way that many people had treated him and his co-workers as they went around proclaiming the Gospel. The prophet, one who knew something of persecution and suffering, could empathise with Paul: <<*Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?*>> (Jeremiah 20:18), and: <<*You have made us filth and rubbish among the peoples*>> (Lamentations 3:45).

It should be particularly noticed how the message of the Cross comes through in vv.12-13; it is rethought in terms of what it means to be the messenger of such a Gospel. Philosophers of the time often scorned the ignorant mob. If a Cynic philosopher was insulted, he would hurl insults back again, especially if the person concerned was rich or famous in the world's eyes. If a Stoic was attacked, he might simply try to rise above it, ignoring the event as beneath his contempt. Even within Judaism, the tradition of the martyrs suggested that if

one were tortured or threatened with execution, one should threaten one's captors that God would condemn and punish them in their turn. But Paul had learnt a different way. When people insulted him, he offered blessings; when they persecuted him, he bore it patiently; when people told lies about him, he spoke gently and kindly in return. What sort of a person behaves like this? Only someone who believes that God's wisdom is revealed in the tortured and broken body of his beloved Son.

II.b.ii.3 1 Corinthians 4:14-21 - Fatherly Admonition

Because Paul was the one who had planted the church in Corinth and was tasked to be an apostle to the Gentiles, he felt a fatherly responsibility towards the saints there. This required him to share his love of them, sometimes with admonishment, for that is what some of them needed because of their arrogance.

¹⁴ I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

1 Corinthians 4:14-15

Admonish you as my beloved children. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of God acting in this very way: <<*Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?*>> (Hebrews 12:7).

Ten thousand guardians most likely refers to church leaders and evangelists who had taught them, such as Apollos and Cephas among others. The word used has the inference of a nanny or childminder, a household servant whose role it was to care for the children, and this analogy bears out well with the contrast to them not having many fathers.

I became your father. Paul clearly felt a parental responsibility to those whom he had brought to faith through the Gospel or nurtured in their own ministry: <<*My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you*>> (Galatians 4:19), <<*But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel*>> (Philippians 2:22), <<*As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children*>> (1 Thessalonians 2:5-7), <<*As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children*>> (1 Thessalonians 2:11), <<*To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord*>> (1 Timothy 1:2), <<*To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord*>> (2 Timothy 1:2), and: <<*I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment*>> (Philemon 10).

¹⁶ I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me.

1 Corinthians 4:16

I appeal to you. Although Paul had apostolic authority over the church, he made no attempt to make them comply with his instructions. Instead, his appeal is to their hearts and minds so that they may follow his teaching. He uses this same approach to another church leader: *<<For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love – and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus>>* (Philemon 8-9).

Be imitators of me. God has designed the Christian life so that much of one's progress comes through imitating other Christians, imperfect though they are: *<<Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ>>* (1 Corinthians 11:1), *<<Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us>>* (Philippians 3:17), *<<For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you>>* (2 Thessalonians 3:7), *<<Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity>>* (1 Timothy 4:12), *<<Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us>>* (Titus 2:7-8), and: *<<Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock>>* (1 Peter 5:3).

Paul's life story is one of dedicated service to God. Following his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus, it became a life of self-sacrifice, total humility and one that would not engage with any self-seeking power struggles that was a feature of human life and one that would soon dog the church. Paul became a model disciple and apostle because he fashioned his whole life on Christ. Few, if any, could become like Paul but he remains an excellent role model to emulate in terms of commitment and attitude by anyone wishing to serve God.

¹⁷ For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church. ¹⁸ But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant.

1 Corinthians 4:17-18

I sent you Timothy. Timothy had joined Paul during the early stages of his second missionary journey: *<<Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek>>* (Acts 16:3). He had been taught by Paul and had then remained a faithful and trusted companion: *<<But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel>>* (Philippians 2:22), staying with Paul during his periods of imprisonment. Paul clearly trusted Timothy to deal with the problems in Corinth as he would later do in Ephesus despite his relative youth: *<<Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity>>* (1 Timothy 4:12).

Some commentators have stated that Timothy may have delivered this letter to the Corinthians but this verse and: <<If Timothy comes, see that he has nothing to fear among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord just as I am>> (1 Corinthians 16:10), indicate that he was already on his way by the time Paul was writing. In addition, Paul makes no mention of Timothy in his opening salutation: <<Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes>> (1 Corinthians 1:1).

But some of you, have become arrogant. Paul's statement is blunt and to the point. This was his way of admonishing those who needed to learn. This can be an effective way of teaching provided it is intended that way and not just used as an opportunity to insult people. Others too used strong, almost judgemental words that were not meant as insults, such as John the Baptist: <<But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?>> (Matthew 3:7), and Jesus addressing similar Jewish leaders: <<Then he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!>> (Mark 7:9).

¹⁹ 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.

1 Corinthians 4:19

I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills. Paul knew that it was not necessarily personal will or desire that would determine his travel plans: <<For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you>> (Romans 1:9-10).

I will find out, their power. Apparently Paul expected a confrontation in which the power of the Holy Spirit would manifest some kind of disciplinary force against those who were harming the church, as was demonstrated in the story of Ananias and Sapphira, recorded in Acts 5:1-11, as well as the account of Bar-Jesus on Cyprus: <<But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, 'You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now listen – the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun.' Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand>> (Acts 13:9-11), and he gives warning to the Corinthians as to what they can expect of him: <<Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ>> (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

²⁰ For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power.

1 Corinthians 4:20

The Gospel is the ‘good news’ that the Kingdom of God is at hand, and had been since the arrival of Jesus, meaning that God’s rule over people’s hearts and lives is now being established, and people should repent and believe in the Gospel. The Kingdom is more than simply the rule of the Spirit within people, since the Kingdom will ultimately include the restoration of all creation. Jesus had revealed the fact that the Kingdom will come in stages. Initially, Jesus was the one who proclaimed the coming saving rule of God. This was the message that was then taken out by people like Paul.

Jesus did not simply talk about the Kingdom but demonstrated its reality through the power of his work, and ultimately through his death and resurrection. He also released his own authority into the hands of those whom he had chosen as apostles to take the message to places like Corinth: *<<And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’>>* (Matthew 28:18-20).

Paul also writes of the Kingdom on several occasions, including: *<<For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit>>* (Romans 14:17), and: *<<This is evidence of the righteous judgement of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering>>* (2 Thessalonians 1:5).

This is one of eight references Paul makes to God’s Kingdom directly. It is referred to 52 times in the Gospels: 5 in Matthew, 13 in Mark, 32 in Luke and twice in John. In addition, Matthew preferred to speak of the Kingdom of Heaven, which he alone refers to, a total of 31 times in his Gospel account.

Many of these references were made by Jesus himself, with perhaps the most poignant being made during the last supper: *<<He said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God’>>* (Luke 22:15-16).

²¹ What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

1 Corinthians 4:21

What would you prefer? Paul is not issuing an ultimatum but extending an olive branch, for it is the Corinthians who can choose what will be the outcome of Paul’s visit to them. He expresses this opinion again in a parallel passage to them: *<<So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down>>* (2 Corinthians 13:10).

A stick refers to a thin rod used for discipline. Paul is speaking metaphorically of the kind of church discipline he is about to describe in 1 Corinthians 5:3-5.