

First Epistle to the Corinthians

7 – Essay One: The Cross and Unity – Unity Revisited (1.4)

Part 2 of 2

1 Corinthians 3:1-4:16

1. Based on Bailey's Outline¹
 - a. **A. The Problem: Divisions, Baptism, and the Cross (1:10-16)**
 - i. "I follow ___" is not a valid statement of identity for Christians – it divides
 - ii. "Our Lord Jesus Christ died for us" is the source of Christian community – it unites
 - iii. The cross is God's gift; baptism is the believer's receiving of God's gift
 - b. **B. The Wisdom and Power of God: The Cross (1:17-2:2)**
 - i. The cross of Christ is the center of Christian theology
 1. The cross is weakness and foolishness to those who reject it
 2. The cross is power and wisdom to those who believe
 - ii. Paul calls upon his audience to *why* they chose to believe
 - iii. Paul demonstrates ethnic unity through his skilled combining of rhetorical patterns
 - c. **B. The Wisdom of God: Revealed Through the Spirit (2:3-16)**
 - i. The cross reiterated as center of Paul's Christian theology
 - ii. Mystery of God's hidden wisdom is the cross of Christ
 - iii. The cross of Christ is vulnerability, weakness, and defeat according to the world
 1. But power according to the world is passing away
 - iv. Paul may not say "Trinity" but he writes in Trinitarian terms
 1. The concept of Trinity demonstrates unity that Christians ought to have
 - v. Both Reason and Spirit must be engaged to know God
 - vi. The purpose of the Christian is to impart the mystery of God to others
 - d. **A. Christian Unity: Paul, Apollos, and Cephas as One (3:1-4:16)**
 - i. Community of faithful is the new land and temple of Israel – no longer physical
 - ii. Ethical practice (orthopraxy) must complement right teachings (orthodoxy)
 - iii. Success in God's eyes is based on faithfulness to his assignment, not visible results
 - iv. All who build will be saved, even if construction is inferior – don't judge efforts
 - v. All who destroy will be destroyed
 - vi. Salvation is not an individual pursuit; it is a community endeavor
2. Possible structures of 3:1-4:16
 - a. *ESVSB*
 - i. God's wisdom answers the problem (1:17b-4:21)
 1. God's Wisdom Applied to Apollos, Paul, and the Corinthians (3:1-4:21)
 - b. *Reading Corinthians*
 - i. Was Paul crucified for you? (1:17-3:4)
 1. What he did *not* teach, how he taught, why he did *not* teach some things (2:6-3:4)
 - a. (*Earlier parts omitted*)
 - b. Paul's response that they are not spiritual and mature (2:16b-3:4)
 - ii. Is Christ divided? (3:5-4:7)
 1. Missionaries are just servants [*diakonoi*] (3:5-23)
 - a. Illustration of field (3:6-9b)
 - b. Illustration of building (3:9c-15)

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*; Kindle ed., location 679

- 2. Missionaries are just servants [*hyperetas*] and stewards [*oikonomous*] (4:1-7)
 - a. Corinthians had judged Paul to be an unfaithful servant (4:2)
 - b. Paul's response (4:3-5)
 - c. Summary statement for 3:5-4:7 (4:6-7)
 - iii. Conclusion (4:8-21)
 - c. Bailey²
 - i. A. Paul and Apollos: It is about you (3:1-4)
 - ii. B. Parable of the field and the farmers (3:5-9)
 - iii. B. Parable of the builders and the building (3:10-17)
 - iv. A. Paul, Apollos, Cephas: It is about Christ (3:18-4:7)
 - v. Concluding thoughts (4:8-16)
3. Paul, Apollos, Cephas: It is about Christ (3:18-4:7)
 - a. (1) and (7)
 - i. Paul has previously established that true wisdom is the cross of Christ
 - ii. It appears some of the Corinthians thought themselves wise – Paul says this is false wisdom
 - 1. "Himself" is singular – Paul is not addressing entire church
 - 2. Pursuit of wisdom of the world by some is destroying the church
 - 3. The solution is for them to become fools, as judged by the ways of the world
 - 4. To accept the cross of Christ as reality is to become foolish by the world's judgment – but that is the only way to God's wisdom
 - iii. "For who sees anything different in you?"
 - 1. Linear reading results in ambiguous interpretations
 - a. Is it referring to conflicts (v.6, puffed up) within the Corinthian church?
 - b. Is it referring to supposed wisdom to pronounce judgment (v.5)
 - 2. Ring composition
 - a. Some in Corinth, the ones boasting about their "wisdom," appear no different than unbelievers in ethical behavior
 - iv. "What do you have that you did not receive?"
 - 1. Major point of contention: Leaders
 - 2. The Corinthian Christians did not earn their leaders – they are gifts
 - 3. Other gifts: life, breath, community, family, gospel, teachers, church, spiritual gifts
 - 4. Everything they have is a gift
 - 5. But some of them behave as if they have not received the gifts
 - a. The gifts of grace *must* result in ethical behavior
 - b. Quarreling, strife, division – these are not ethical behaviors
 - c. Their "boasting" about following one leader or another is not ethical
 - i. "Boasting" appears in chapter 13

² Bailey, loc. 1349

Table 1: From Bailey, loc. 1560

1 Corinthians 3:18-4:7		Motifs
1	^{3:18-19a} Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.	No boasting / About yourselves
2	^{19b-21a} For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." So let no one boast in [or of] men.	Scripture No boasting about leaders
3	^{21b-23} For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.	Paul - Apollos All yours
4a	^{4:1-2} This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.	See us as / servants and stewards / under judgment
4b	³⁻⁴ 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. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.	The Lord Judges me
4c	⁵ 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.	The Lord Judges and commends all
5	^{6a} I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers,	Paul - Apollos All yours
6	^{6b} that you may learn by [or through] us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one [imp., leader] against another.	Scripture / Don't get puffed up about leaders
7	⁷ 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?	No boasting / About yourselves

- b. (2) and (6)
 - i. Paul paraphrases and adapts scripture
 - 1. References to Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11
 - 2. Scripture describes relation of man's wisdom to God
 - a. Even the wise are snared by God
 - b. Wisdom of man is futile
 - ii. Therefore, don't boast ("I follow") about your leaders
 - 1. First, the leaders are only men – their wisdom is limited and fallible
 - 2. Second, your wisdom and perspective is also limited and fallible so how can you choose wisely between leaders
 - 3. Paul's admonition: Don't pit one leader over another
 - a. Remember, all leaders are servants of God and are equal
 - iii. "Not to go beyond what is written"
 - 1. Complicated, obscure, difficult to interpret precisely
 - 2. Does it refer to scripture, and if so, what?
 - a. Remember, scripture for Paul is primarily the Hebrew scripture – there is no New Testament
 - b. Does Paul have in mind contemporary writings about Jesus?
 - c. Literal application would force us to throw out most of the NT
 - 3. Is it a popular proverb that Paul borrows?
 - 4. Best option is to try to get at the spirit of what Paul likely had in mind, in keeping with the themes of this essay
 - a. The cross of Christ is the primary message
 - b. Anything message that tries to explain away the cross' foolishness (according to the world) or tries to remove it altogether, is no longer the gospel. It has been stripped of its wisdom and power.
 - c. Don't do that
 - iv. Paul's refrain throughout this essay, repeated in different words
 - 1. Focus on the cross of Christ, its wisdom, its power, and you won't pit one leader over another in an attempt to increase your own standing
- c. (3) and (5)
 - i. "All are yours"
 - 1. "Yours" is plural – Paul's subject is the entire community of believers, as a unit
 - 2. All teachers/leaders – to pick one leader over another is to miss out on the gifts offered by others
 - 3. Physical space, existence, and time – these are no longer limits for the church
 - ii. "You are Christ's, and Christ is God's"
 - 1. There is only one community of the faithful – it belongs to Christ
 - 2. The church has all things because it belongs to Christ, and Christ has all things
 - 3. "Christ is God's" does not mean Christ is subordinate to God in being, but rather that Christ served God's will in the function of salvation

The Corinthian error is an easy one to repeat... Our slogans take the form of "I am of the Presbyterians," or "of the Pentecostals," or "of the Roman Catholics." Or they might take ideological forms: "I am of the liberals," or "of the evangelicals," or "of the fundamentalists." And these are also used as weapons: "Oh, he's a fundamentalist, you know." Which means that we no longer need to listen to him, since his ideology has determined his overall value as a spokesman for God. It is hardly possible in a day like ours that one will not have denominational, theological, or ideological preferences. The difficulty lies in allowing that it might really be true that "all things are ours," including those whom we think God would do better to be without. But God is full of surprises; and he may choose to minister to us from the "strangest" of sources, if we were but more truly "in Christ" and therefore free in him to learn and to love.³

d. Center (4)

- i. Theme of "judgment" runs through this entire section
- ii. How does Paul see himself and colleagues?
 1. Servants [diakonoi] assigned by the Lord (3:5)
 2. Fellow workers [sunergoi] for God (3:9)
 3. Assistants [huperetai] to Christ (4:1)
 - a. Refers to a physician's assistant, a priest's helper; also word for a synagogue official and assistants in the Jerusalem temple⁴
 4. Stewards [oikonomoi] of the mysteries of God (4:1)
- iii. Paul is a servant to all the churches; but he is only accountable to the Lord
 1. The first two words from chapter 3 emphasize service
 2. The last two words from chapter 4 emphasize leadership
- iv. A steward must be faithful, but to whom?
 1. Some Corinthians may have thought themselves as the adjudicators of Paul's accountability
 - a. The Corinthian efforts to judge him and tear him apart will not influence him
 - b. The Corinthians are not his employer
 2. Paul does not even judge himself
 - a. Paul will not engage in destructive self-criticism
 - b. That doesn't mean he does not self-reflect, but the results are clouded by human fallibility
 3. Paul defines faithfulness, not success, as the criterion for accountability
 4. Only the Lord has perfect vision and is able to judge accurately

The Corinthians had assumed the right to subject their leaders to scrutiny and then divide up into competing groups on the basis of their conclusions. Paul knew that the key to all of this was the inner motive of those involved. It was time for acceptance, not judgment. The Lord, in his good time, would bring to light the motives of hearts now hidden in darkness. Then and only then every person, not just Paul, Apollos and Cephas, but *everyone* will receive "their commendation from God."⁵

³ *New International Commentary on the New Testament, The First Epistle*; entry on 1 Cor. 3:23.

⁴ Bailey, loc. 1639

⁵ Bailey, loc. 1670

5. Note: Non-judgment is specific to the case of jealousy and strife – other matters may require immediate judgment
 - a. Differences in opinions and methods, theological variations fit under the category of jealousy and strife
- e. Summary points for 3:18-4:7
 - i. Christian focus should always be on the cross of Christ, never on leaders
 - ii. Boasting about leaders and favoring one over another are wrong; such actions divide
 - iii. From “I follow” to “We belong”
 - iv. Valuing teachings (“I follow”) is not enough; ethical behavior (“We belong”) must be demonstrated
 - v. Any of God’s gifts can be idolized without ever receiving them – because receiving them will have an impact on ethics and behavior
 - vi. Authentic Christian leaders are servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries
 - vii. Never take away the foolishness and weakness of the cross
 1. Jesus’ response to power, abuse, and violence is human weakness but God’s strength
 - viii. All Christian leaders belong to all Christians – by favoring a narrow set, Christians miss out on some of God’s gifts
 - ix. All Christians belong to Christ and God
 - x. Christians serve one another, but are accountable to the Lord
 - xi. Faithfulness, not success, is the standard of judgment
 - xii. Only the Lord can judge

Table 2: From Bailey, loc. 1687

1 Corinthians 4:8-16 (ESV)		Motifs
1	⁸ 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!	You and We
2	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.	Parable of God's spectacle (apostle's condition)
3	¹⁰ 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.	We and you
4	^{11-12a} To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands.	<u>Our condition</u>
5	^{12b-13a} When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat.	Our response To our condition
6	^{13b} We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.	<u>Our condition</u>
7	¹⁴⁻¹⁶ I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless [<i>lit.</i> , ten thousand] guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁶ I urge you, then, be imitators of me.	Concluding Personal appeal

⁶ Lit., “For in Christ Jesus through the gospel I myself begot you.” UBC, 1 Cor. 4:15

4. Concluding thoughts (4:8-16)
 - a. Two A-B-A segments with one standalone segment
 - i. First A-B-A compares the condition of the Corinthians vs. the apostles
 - ii. Middle of first A-B-A (condition of apostles) forms the theme for the second A-B-A
 - iii. Middle of second A-B-A describes appropriate behavior of Christians
 - iv. Essay concludes with Paul admonishing his readers to imitate his behavior⁷
 - b. First segment – comparing Corinthians to the apostles
 - i. (1) focuses on the Corinthians; (3) on the apostles
 - ii. Heavy dose of irony and sarcasm in (1)
 1. Paul repeats back to the Corinthians what they are really saying about themselves
 - a. “We have all we want. We are already rich. We are kings.”
 2. They have an overrealized eschatology – they think they have obtained the full benefits of God’s kingdom
 - a. Yes, the presence of the Spirit means the kingdom has come, but it is not fully realized yet
 3. Paul sarcastically tells them that if they are actually reigning now as kings, their vision for the kingdom leaves no room for the apostles
 4. Paul adds with more sarcasm that he wishes the true reign in the kingdom had arrived, because then they would be kings together
 - iii. (3) lists three points of comparison
 1. Three items reflects on three assertions of (1) but even more so calls the readers back to 1:26, “not many ~~of you were~~ wise according to worldly standards, not many ~~were~~ powerful, not many ~~were~~ of noble birth.”
 - a. Paul tells them that the claims of 4:10 (“We are wise, strong, honored”) place them in the same category as those who don’t belong to Christ, even though they claim to belong (“We are wise in Christ”)
 2. In comparison the apostles appear to be foolish, weak, and in disrepute
 - a. But in 1:27-28 Paul already wrote that these very attributes are reversed in God’s eyes. “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are...”
 - b. So who are the truly wise, strong, and honored?
 - iv. (2) reflects on the apostle’s condition
 1. Paul utilizes imagery from Roman gladiatorial combat events and also from military victory parades⁸
 2. The last events at an arena involved those who were sentenced to die
 3. The very end of a military victory parade were the prisoners condemned to die, to be sacrificed to the Roman gods
 4. This parable bears similarity to Jesus’ crucifixion
 5. Paul identifies himself with Jesus and infers that the Corinthians are in fact, in danger of rejecting Jesus by their claims and spiritual priorities
 6. Once more, the cross of Christ is foremost in Paul’s thinking

⁷ Bailey, loc. 1688, “Some type of personal appeal concludes each of the five essays.”

⁸ Bailey, loc. 1709; *Understanding the Bible Commentary*, 1 Cor. 4:9; *NICNT*, 1 Cor. 4:9

c. Second segment – Apostles’ response to their condition

- i. In v.11 Paul may be borrowing language from Isaiah 58:7, “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him...”
 1. Isaiah 58 describes true vs. false religion. False religion is strict on observances but neglects ethics. True religion does not neglect observances, but ethics takes precedence.
 2. It is quite possible that Paul accuses the quarreling (c.f., Isa. 58:4) Corinthians of false religion and identifies himself and his colleagues with the true
- ii. 4:11-12a lists reasons why Paul and his colleagues may have been viewed disdainfully and “less spiritual”
 1. They didn’t appear as “respectable” persons
 2. They had to work for a living, rather than living off of honorariums
- iii. Not only did they suffer from privations, but they were subject to abuse
 1. Paul’s response defies cultural norms

In traditional Middle Eastern culture (and elsewhere), retaliation is considered one of the marks of an honorable self-respecting person... Paul’s responses to insult, persecution and slander were not approved or applauded in the culture of which he was a part... But the “mind of Christ” and his sacrificial life pointed Paul in a radically new direction. That new narrow way, here on display, links Paul’s earlier discussion of the cross to his personal life. This is how he takes up his cross and follows Jesus.⁹

iv. Scum and refuse

1. The results of cleaning are in view – these are the things that are thrown out
2. A surface reading stops at the apostles being the lowest of the low (which is not entirely wrong, but perhaps an incomplete view)
3. A deeper reading, taking into account the metaphor of cleansing and purification leads to the following:

[Paul] knew what physical deprivation meant... His reward was often insult, persecution and slander; but Paul responded according to the irenic admonition of Jesus. The end result of all this was that *the dirt scoured from the world* was poured upon him and his apostolic co-laborers. They then acted as cleansing agents, taking to themselves hate, malice, and bitterness; and by absorbing this without violent or vengeful response, they took away those evils. Thus in a particular way they were carrying on the work of Christ.¹⁰

4. NICNT on 4:11-13—

Perhaps if we were truly more like our Lord, standing more often in opposition to the status quo with its worldly wisdom and more often in favor of justice, we too would know more about what it means to be scum in the eyes of the world’s “beautiful” or “powerful” people.

⁹ Bailey, loc. 1739

¹⁰ Orr/Walther, *1 Corinthians*; quoted in Bailey, loc. 1748

- d. Final segment – concluding appeal
 - i. Paul now speaks of himself as father (was mother in 3:2) to the Corinthians
 - ii. “Guides” means guardians
 - 1. Care for children often left to household servants and slaves
 - iii. Paul claims a special relationship with the Corinthians, beyond that of mere guardian
 - 1. As its founder, Paul “begot” and fathered the church there
 - 2. Not for himself, but for them to be “in Christ Jesus”
 - 3. Therefore, they should pay special attention to his words
 - 4. He comes as a loving father to them, but they do need correction
 - iv. Echoes of two parables¹¹
 - 1. Hosea 11:1-9 (Lord’s love for Israel) and Luke 15:11-32 (Prodigal)
 - 2. Common themes in Paul’s text and the two parables
 - a. Father and children
 - b. The father is insulted and mistreated by his wayward children
 - c. The father tries to reconcile and still calls his children beloved
 - d. The father admonishes the wayward children
 - e. The father goes beyond norms and expectations
 - f. The father presents himself as a model for his children to emulate
 - g. Compassion is mentioned specifically (Hosea, Luke)
 - 3. In Essay 1, Part 4, three parables of Jesus are alluded to—
 - a. Parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-10; 1 Cor. 3:6-9)
 - b. Parable of the two builders (Luke 6:47-49; 1 Cor. 3:9b-15)
 - c. Parable of the prodigal
 - v. Paul’s final appeal is “imitate me”¹² not “follow me”

What becomes transparent in this final appeal is that for Paul right thinking simply is not enough. The gospel must result in appropriate behavior as well.¹³

 - 1. It is easy to agree with sound teaching
 - 2. It is much more difficult to put it into practice
 - 3. The disciples followed Jesus for 3+ years, absorbing his teachings, but even more, observing how he behaved. Then they were sent to do (imitate) what he did.
 - 4. “I follow Christ” is not enough. “We imitate Christ” should be our motto.
 - a. We are to imitate the examples of self-sacrifice to raise up others
 - 5. We learn to imitate Christ by learning from Christ-imitators who have walked the path before us
5. Summary points 4:8-16
 - a. Arrogance divides; humility unites – the world values arrogance; the cross is humility
 - b. The apostles have done their best to model humility exemplified by the cross of Christ
 - c. Part of Christ’s work was to absorb evil and redeem it for good through love¹⁴ – Christians are to continue this work
 - d. Paul identifies himself with Christ’s suffering redemptive work
 - e. It’s not about who “I follow” but about who “We imitate”

¹¹ Bailey, loc. 1758

¹² In 11:1, Paul repeats “imitate me” but adds “as I imitate Christ”

¹³ *NICNT*, 1 Cor. 4:14-21

¹⁴ This is the crux of the *Christus Victor* model of the atonement (c.f., Gustaf Aulen)