

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus, You have given us the priceless gifts of compassion, forgiveness, kindness, and of peace, and You have shown these things in Your own life. The world thinks little of these things, but we see them as a reflection of Your glory in our midst, and we give You thanks. May we use these gifts as You would have used them, Lord Jesus, and through them, may we show the world something of the love of God. AMEN.

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Pray today for those who suffer from preventable diseases throughout the world, through lack of funding or because of poor government. Pray for Christian medical agencies.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who work with the text of Scripture.** *Pray for those who work to bring the Bible into parts of the world where it is banned; in parts of the Far East, or in countries where all forms of religion other than the Muslim faith, are forbidden.*
- *Pray for those people of the world whose voice is never heard; women in many countries, the poor, children or in other places, the aged.*
- *Give thanks to God for His mercies in keeping you safe while you travel*

Meditation

Be free, Brothers and Sisters; be free in the Spirit of God.

Be free, for you are gloriously different but equal,
Free from the cultural pressures which bind you;

Be free, sister, to be a woman in God's image,
Free in the Godly qualities of being 'female';

Be free, brother, to be a man in God's image,
Free in the Godly qualities of being 'male';

Be free, each one, to be as God has made you,
Free to reflect God's image back into society;

Be free within the church to receive His gifts,
Free to minister your God given calling.

Be free, God saves you; and you are saved to be free.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 4:14-21

¹⁴ I do not write these things to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. ¹⁵ Even if you were to have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for I gave you birth in Christ Jesus through the Gospel; ¹⁶ I urge you therefore, become like me.

¹⁷ Because of this I sent Timothy to you, the son I love who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my 'pathway of life in Christ Jesus', as I teach everywhere, in every church.

¹⁸ Some, assuming I might not return to you, have become arrogant. ¹⁹ On the contrary! I will come to you very soon, if the Lord wills, and then I will find out not merely what these arrogant people say, but what power they have; ²⁰ for the kingdom of God is not about talk but about power.

²¹ Which do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in a loving spirit and gentleness?

Review

As we read a passage like this, it is hard not to escape the conclusion that it reflects a broken relationship. Paul had been the first to preach the gospel in Corinth, but since those days, the people there had gone their own ways. Great preachers such as Apollos (1:12, 3:4) had gone to Corinth, and influenced by him and others, people had gathered into groups according to their opinions and preferences. They had heard that in Christ they were free, so they exercised freedom without personal restraint, and ended up claiming their own wisdom, independence (2:15), and much more. In contrast to the hopes of their founder, Paul, they had wandered from the Gospel, and Paul's name had been reduced to a label attached to one of the 'supporter groups' within the church. In addition, the Gospel Paul had preached so fruitfully when he first went there (Acts 18:7f.) had been compromised by arguments and dissent, and in attempting to write about it, Paul had ended up becoming quite emotional (4:6-13).

People commonly see things in a new light after getting emotional, and this is what seems to be the case in our reading today. Yesterday, we read Paul's emotional yet controlled outburst, describing the difficulties of his mission and comparing this to the easy life of the rich in Corinth (4:6-13). Today's passage, however, reads in a simple and straightforward manner. Paul had calmed down, and he wrote to clarify his relationship to the church at Corinth. His words also shed light on a number of important topics.

To begin with, Paul describes himself as the founding father of the church, and he depicts the people there as his '*dear children*' (4:14). To us, this sounds rather too familiar, but family relationships were different in those days. A Roman child was required to be absolutely obedient to a father, and there was no room for today's sentimentality. In many households, a son was expected to do the same duties as a slave or servant. Paul plays on this imagery when he speaks of giving birth to the church at Corinth '*in Christ Jesus*' (4:15), but his call to the Corinthians to be '*like me*' (4:16), is remarkable. Paul was not requiring the Corinthians to be like him in every way, only in being a servant of God for the sake of the Gospel; he had brought them the message of salvation and it was their job to pass it on.

In the next paragraph (4:17), Paul draws Timothy into his discussion about the Gospel and the growth of the Kingdom. He is described here as an intermediary, someone who represented Paul and visited his churches to remind them of their obligations and preach the Gospel message first given by Paul. This confirms Paul's model for the growth of the kingdom of God; it depends on people passing on the Gospel, preaching it faithfully, and ensuring that it is not changed.

This deserves our closest attention, because it continues to be important that the Gospel message we preach today is consistent with the Gospel we received. At a time when many churches feel it necessary to publish their own 'statement of faith', we should surely look carefully at this subject. If God requires the faithful preaching of His Gospel consistent with the historic message of salvation as preached by Paul, then we are at fault if we give people the impression that it has changed, or that we have an 'angle' on it. Our mission is already identified, and our faith is already defined; everything else is peripheral.

Towards the end of our passage, Paul issues what may seem to be a threat. Some at Corinth clearly thought they would never see Paul again, and therefore were unconcerned to cause offence or differ from his teaching (4:18). But Paul was on the war path, and in verse 19, indicated his desire to come to Corinth again. This is the background to his famous words '*for the kingdom of God is not about talk but about power*' (4:19). These words have many uses, but we should remember that they express Paul's confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit both to work through him, and also put things right within the church of God.

Our passage today concludes the opening section of 1 Corinthians, and tomorrow's reading from chapter 5 begins our study of some difficult issues in the life of the church at Corinth. What we have read today does not tell us much new, but it strongly reinforces our picture of the way God worked in the first century to establish his Church. Paul's work as a missionary and apostle was unique, because God used it to establish the Church and set a foundation for the proclamation of the Gospel to future generations. We should seek to learn everything we can from what he did; and here, we should learn that the Gospel is one clear and precise message about the salvation of humanity, and we have a responsibility to pass it on, undiluted.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Paul the 'father' of the Corinthian church (4:14-16)
- Giving birth, and genetics! (4:15)
- The 'pathway of life in Christ Jesus' (4:17)
- Tensions with Corinth (4:18,19)
- 'Talk' or 'power' (4:18-21)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V15 'ten thousand guardians in Christ'

The Greek word here is 'paidagogos', a word used to describe the slaves who looked after children during the day. Some translations say 'teachers' here because it seems to link with what Paul is saying more fully.

V15 'I gave you birth in Christ Jesus through the Gospel...'

Here, Paul is stating his authority as the 'father' of the Corinthian church, and some translations have 'I am your father ...' instead of 'I gave you birth'. The Greek word here is not the normal word for 'father', but the word sometimes translated as 'begat' in old English versions, it means 'fathered' in the sense of 'one who caused you to be born'.

V16 'become like me'

You will find that most versions say 'be imitators of me', however, the words used and the context (see previous verse) suggest that Paul was expecting the Corinthians to be like him because he was their father in Christ – see study.

V17 'He will remind you of my "pathway of life in Christ Jesus" ...'

In most translations you will find 'he will remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus', which sounds very pompous. However, there are no quotation marks in Greek, and because the word for 'ways' means 'a taught pathway' or 'conduct', I feel that Paul is referring to his whole package of teaching and example, and this is what he wanted Timothy to remind the Corinthians about.

V19 'then I will find out not merely what these arrogant people say, but what power they have'

The Greek says literally, 'then I will know not the words of the arrogant but their power.' Each translation attempts to make this a little more readable in English.

Paul the 'father' of the Corinthian church (4:14-16)

If you or I had been a member of the Corinthian church and received a letter such as this, we might feel very firmly put down. Like a firm father or a schoolmaster acting against some misdemeanour, Paul said that he wrote to the church not to shame them but to warn. His sole purpose was to see the Corinthian church repent and return to the Gospel, and the . The one characteristic of Paul's writing found throughout the New Testament is that he would not compromise God's revelation, and he would not tolerate deviation from it. In anyone else, we might say that this attitude is presumptive, but despite the disagreements between Paul and Corinth, the world has since judged Paul right in what he said about the Gospel; his words have been tested.

In Paul's day, children raised in relatively wealthy families were educated and trained for life not by their fathers, but by hired teachers and scholars. In order to make sure that the children behaved and did their work during the majority of the day, slaves accompanied them and made sure they did what they were told. This is what was meant by a 'paidagogos' (see notes above), or 'guardian'. This is of interest firstly because this was quite different to the traditionally close relationship between a father and a son in a Jewish family, and we should note that Paul (a Jew) had learned to use an example appropriate to the people he addressed rather than take one from his own experience. Secondly, by using the word 'guardians' or 'paidagogos' here, Paul was speaking about the church leaders at Corinth and not the visiting preachers such as Apollos or Cephas (Peter). Criticism is therefore levelled at the local church leadership for not protecting the Gospel they had received, and allowing the church to grow by worldly means. Paul believed the problems existed in the church and its leadership, not amongst the apostles or evangelists.

'Giving birth', and genetics!

The Greek word used for 'I gave you birth' is the same one used in genealogies of the Bible; for example, Matthew 1:1-17 in the New Testament, and Genesis (e.g. Genesis 5) in the Old. It is the word that links 'father' and 'son, and suggests the notion of 'the one responsible for' what happened next. In the case of our text, it refers not to the creation of people, but to the creation of a church through the preaching of the Gospel. Interestingly, the same Greek word ('gennao') has been used to define the modern science of

'genetics', which describes the characteristics of individuals contained within the molecular structure of genes and the DNA of which they are made.

Although Paul knew nothing of this, he did know his Greek well, and he expected those who were spiritually 'born' through his ministry to bear some ('genetic') characteristics of his own, that is, his 'likeness'! It was the lack of these characteristics that disturbed him; Paul looked at the Corinthian church and did not see his own 'child', the 'likeness' was not there. Now if such an experience would be shattering for a real father, it is also shattering for Paul. We often read verse 16, 'I urge you therefore, become like me' as a purely theological statement (as I have in the introduction above). However, it might be a more heart-felt plea from the 'father' to the 'child', to behave like 'family'!

The 'pathway of life in Christ Jesus' (4:17)

If you accept what I have said in the 'Notes' above, then it is possible that Paul had more teaching about the Christian life available in written form than we now know of. The reason I suggest this is because it was an established practice of Pharisees (and Paul was a trained Pharisee), for teachers or rabbis (within Judaism) to write a 'Halakah', that is, a commentary on the Old Testament law that interpreted it for ordinary followers of the faith. Paul may have embarked upon the task of writing a personal Halakah even before he was 'saved', and subsequently changed it and added to it. Certainly, there is a hint here in our text that Paul may have been referring to a document, or even a shortened and notated summary of teaching. It would have been something Paul had developed and used as a way of teaching pagan Romans about the truths of God in Jesus Christ, and entitled 'pathway of life in Christ Jesus'.

The idea of an 'aide memoir' is significant if we accept that Paul was concerned to keep the Gospel accurate, even though no such document has ever been found. It may be that sections of the famous letters, such as Romans or Galatians are based upon such a document. For example, Paul's great explanation of how to live the Christian life in Romans 12, or the 'fruit of the Spirit' in Galatians 5. For centuries, scholars have wondered whether passages like these show signs of composition, and this would be understandable if Paul had an aide memoir.

Tensions with Corinth (4:18,19)

It seems that some at Corinth were emboldened to believe that Paul would not come to visit again (4:18); for them, he was 'past history'. It may be that Paul had received a report of this from Chloe (1:11). Paul was eager to refute this suggestion, and it seems from what is said in 2 Corinthians (1:16 and 10:14) that Paul did in fact go to Corinth again, though the evidence of this does not exist in Acts. The second letter indicates that the difficulties between Paul and the Corinthians were not entirely dealt with, and that there remained considerable tension between Paul and a significant number of Christians there.

'Talk' or 'power' (4:18-21)

In verse 19, Paul says that his intention of coming again would be to test not merely the words of those he felt were moving away from the Gospel, but to see what 'power' they had. For Paul, the power of God was the Holy Spirit, and the Gospel was shown in works of power at the discretion of the Holy Spirit. He was not looking for any such powerful demonstrations of the work of others, but power in terms of influence. Sometimes, we forget that one of the most powerful things in human affairs can be friendship or the voice of reason, and these can be manipulated to any ends whether good or evil. What kind of power did Paul's opponents have, and how many people had they turned away from the Gospel and from faith?

Verse 20 is fascinating, containing these words 'for the kingdom of God is not about talk but about power'. This is one of only a few texts within Paul's writing that mention the Kingdom of God (see 1 Cor 15:24, Gal 5:21, Eph 5:5 etc.) and this of course, lies at the heart of Jesus' teaching ministry. When Jesus taught the crowds, most of his parables were descriptions of the Kingdom of God (see Matthew 13 or 25, for example), and people have long asked why Paul seems to show little interest in the parables and the detailed lifestyle teaching which some of them contain. The answer to this question may well be that Paul observed precisely what he now says in this verse, that 'the kingdom of God is not about talk but power', in other words, it was not just Jesus' teachings that changed people, but what He did on the Cross and in the Resurrection. This was the supreme miracle, the greatest 'work of power' ever, and one that enables the coming of the Holy Spirit, and all that followed in the growth of the early church, the true expression of God's 'rule' on earth!

Discipleship

Application

- Passing on the Gospel to our children ...

- The importance of taking notes!
- The work of the Holy Spirit – in power

Passing on the Gospel to our children ...

This passage teaches us again about the value of understanding our heritage of faith. For each church, there is a history of faith which goes back through real people who have done the work of evangelism. Sometimes this has been done by preachers and teachers, but more often than not it has been the task of parents and teachers who have ensured that the children of Christian parents have been taught the faith as they grow, in whatever way is helpful. From this, young people have found themselves confronted with the claims of Christ, and have often responded. In many Western countries, the nourishment of faith within the home has been eroded by modern society and lifestyle, and the church has been slow to recognise this fundamental attack on its basic mission. Nevertheless, if the problem is recognised, there is no reason why we cannot change our ways so that the Gospel is passed on faithfully to our children.

The importance of taking notes!

As mentioned above, there are hints within this text of the importance of writing things down and taking notes. Just as Paul may have written some things down for reference, any notes we make can be of great help in our Christian journey. For example, the task of writing down these notes is of immeasurable help to the author! Of course, notes can never take the place of Scripture and the Word of God. However, they can be of benefit to us as we seek to be methodical and learn as much as we can about our faith and how it applies to our lives.

The work of the Holy Spirit – in power

Lastly, the evidence of the Holy Spirit working amongst us in power provides the proof of our faith. It can never be the power of talk alone, and mere human reasoning, whilst an essential part of our journey of faith, is often left standing by the sheer force of God's Holy Spirit (4:20). How we receive the things of God will determine what we experience of the Spirit, as Paul says here. For if we hold back and rebel against the idea that God can and will work amongst us in power, then the Holy Spirit will feel like a whip. If we stand on the one true Gospel, undivided by history and witnessed to whenever Christ is proclaimed today, then the Holy Spirit will come in the form of a 'loving spirit' (4:21).

Questions for groups

1. Who are the founders of your own church, and where did it come from? How far back can you go to investigate this?
2. How easy would you find it to write a log of your own experiences of faith, or a summary of what God is calling you to do and be?
3. What evidence is there of the Holy Spirit coming to work amongst the people of your church in power?

Discipleship challenges

- *Do what you can to research the origins of your own church, and if you get back to some individual who set up a meeting somewhere, try to find out what influenced him or her, and how the Gospel was passed down, eventually, to you.*
- *Pray that God's people will always give thanks for those who have brought them the message of salvation. Pray that they will always learn from the past so that they can pass the Gospel on to future generations with the love and power of Christ.*

Final Prayer

The measure of Your grace, Lord Jesus, is the passion You showed for people and your care for them in life and death. Lead us in Your pathway of life, we pray, so that we may show love and care for those we meet and testify to the power of Your saving work in all we do. Be present with us as we walk in Your steps, Lord Jesus. AMEN