

**VCBC SLG Fall Term 2023**  
**The Book of I Corinthians**  
**Lesson #3**  
**First Report from the Chloe's Household**  
**Part II – chs. 3-4**

**I. Introduction:**

**1: 10 – 6:20 Addressing reports from the Chloe's Household**

***1: 10 – 4: 21 First "report" - The Elevation of Human Wisdom in the Church***

The Corinthians are more than likely being influenced by the Greek culture that revered human wisdom, especially in the form of philosophy to the point that the church also elevated worldly wisdom and regarded their teachers/leaders through the same lens.

The result is division, when each seeks to distinct themselves, perhaps, as more spiritual, more correct and even purer in resolving church matters such as:

- decision making (e.g. dealing with immoral behavior within the church),
- resolutions of disputes (financial disputes among them) and
- interpretation or applications of Scriptural truths (to eat or not to eat food sacrificed to idols).

In the process, they try to drag godly leaders such as Paul, Apollos and Peter (and even Christ) to bolster their position over such issues.

Paul shames them by

- comparing the fleeting existence of their revered philosophers with the risen Christ,
- reminding them of the power of the gospel in their own personal transformation and
- pointing out that we who have the Holy Spirit are the most (only) discerning when it comes to spiritual matters and powerfully asserting that (and allow me to translate literally 2:15)
- **“But on the one hand, the spiritual man discerns all things, on the other hand, he is discerned by no one (i.e. the world).”** (*The interlinear Greek-English*, 661)
- The reason? **“we have the mind of Christ.”** (2:16)

**II. 3: 1 - 17 Church Leaders and Teachers are mere “Servants”**

Following this powerful assertion that should have settled the matter once-for-all, and yet, there is an immediate question: “How valid is Paul’s last statement when it applies to the Corinthian Christians? Are they really spiritually discerning since they do have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?

3: 1-4 The answer is emphatic “no”!

**“Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as spiritual but as people of the flesh—mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3 You are still of the flesh. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among**

**you, are you not of the flesh? Are you not behaving like mere men? 4 For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men?”**

The Corinthians are definitely Christians, even saints (1:2), but Paul calls them “People (or men) of the flesh” and thus loosely puts believers into two different types:

- The “spiritual” or NIV would translate (correctly): “People who live by the Spirit”, and
- The “fleshly” or NIV would translate: “worldly”, or in contrast to the former, we may simply call them, “People who live by the flesh” (hence the saying, “carnal Christians” based on the Latin word, *“carnalis”* meaning flesh)

Therefore, the marks of carnal Christians, as Paul puts it, include:

- Those only base their spiritual diet on “milk”
- Thus, they are not mature, but infants in Christ (Hebrews 5:13)
- They are behaving like “mere men”, i.e. not capable of living by the Spirit, but following their fleshly instinct—like animals!
- And the proof: jealousy and quarreling manifested in being followers of men not the Spirit!

Application: anytime, differences that turn into quarreling and divisions are definite sign of “carnality”, i.e. not living by (the influence or guidance of) the Spirit.

As to “jealousy” which is more of a judgment call, we shall discuss it when we come to 4:5.

### 3: 5-17 Leaders and Teachers are mere entrusted “servants” for the most sacred task

- 3: 5-9 Mere Servants—1<sup>st</sup> analogy of “Planting”

**“5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants (deacons), through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose (or rather “are one”), and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. 9 For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.”**

- By using the term “deacons”, Paul emphasizes on the lowly nature of such a role as commonly used of “table-waiting” in the Greek society (though later developed into a rather honored position in the church).
- Paul uses the analogy of working on “God’s field”—a rather appropriate analogy given the organic nature of a plant.
- Since the Corinthian Christians pitch Paul against Apollos, he uses this analogy to hammer home the following truths:
  - Each is given a different task—but it does not mean one is more important or honored than the other—in fact, it isn’t “anything”
  - Paul is called to plant the seed, Apollos is called to water
  - And they are “one”—no difference in God’s eyes—they are co-laborers
  - Each will receive their reward (if they are faithful)

- Most importantly, they can plant all they can, they can water all they can, if God does not make it grow—they and their labor are really “nothing”!

**Application:** apart from the obvious applications above, we thus have to be reminded that the “growth” in terms of numbers is never the gauge of one’s faithfulness, because it is God **“who added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”** (Acts 2:47)

Transition: the last word in v.9 provides a transition, as Paul uses a 2<sup>nd</sup> analogy to describe the work of God’s servants—as builders of God’s building.

- 3: 10-17 Mere Servants—2<sup>nd</sup> analogy of “Building”

**“10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13 their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. 14 If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. 15 If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.**

- This 2<sup>nd</sup> analogy is not about an inorganic building, but rather the very temple of God—the believers in which (or in whom) God dwells.
- Since this is God’s temple, the builders should build with care—meaning ought to “watch out”!
- Again, Paul sees himself having a different role from Apollos
  - He is the one who lays the foundation—he is quick to point out that he is not the foundation but Christ
  - Apollos builds on the foundation (of Christ)—i.e. the superstructure, if you like!
- With what care should we build God’s temple then?
  - Whatever we build has to be in tune with the foundation who is Christ
  - Thus, anything that does not befit the foundation—Within the context of their divisions and elevation of human wisdom—i.e. not in tune with the “foolishness of God”—the gospel of the crucified Christ, will not really be part of this building—though it may appear to be so
  - On the other hand, anything this is in tune with the foundation—the gospel of the crucified Christ— will contribute to the building of this temple.
- How will we know: there will be a “Day” of testing
  - Most see the “Day” as the Day of Jesus’ return (rightfully)
  - As hay, wood or gold is a metaphor, so is the fire, but the test obviously is done by Christ upon His return to reveal the kind work we put it
  - If what we build is not in tune with the foundation, it would be revealed as nothing, like hay and wood that will not survive the fire
  - If what we build is in tune with the foundation, it would also be revealed as precious metals

- The former will “suffer loss”, meaning all their effort will come to naught, but they are still “saved” which is a very important truth, and
- The latter will receive their reward—while what the reward will be is not mentioned here, we can refer to the rewards of the “overcomers” mentioned in the seven letters in Revelation (chs. 2-4).
- Transition:
  - As much as our work will be revealed (only) upon the return of the Lord, Paul goes on to warn that “we should not play with fire” (as it were) when it comes to our work on the temple of God.

**16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple."**

In view of the fact that believers are God's temple, and the word used of the “temple” is “*naos*” which is not the general term of the whole temple, but the “sanctuary” which is the very presence of God.

- And because of the sacredness of the “sanctuary”, Paul seems to go beyond simply the building with shoddy work, but the very behavior that “destroys” the temple itself.
- And that behavior, within the context of these chapters, refers to “the pursuit of *Sophia* (knowledge)” which is “leading the church toward total destruction” and their “divisions” resulting therefrom (Fee, *I Corinthians*, 139, 146).
- The use of the word, “destroy” is a subject of many disputes, and Paul does not seem desirous to clarify, but we can try to make sense of it by asking the following logical questions:
  - Can the temple of God be destroyed?
    - As a body of Christ, it cannot and will never be destroyed: **“The gates of Hades will not overcome it.”** (Matthew 16:18)
    - But as a local body, many local churches in history have disappeared (including the seven churches mentioned in Revelation) as God appears to have removed His “golden lampstand” from their midst.
    - In that sense, if anyone whose conduct contributes to its “destruction”, they will be “destroyed” by God—although we do not understand its very meaning, but the punishment appears to be very severe.
    - Many, based on 3:15—the escaping from fire—opines that it does not refer to the loss of salvation.

### III. 3: 18 - 23 Concluding Warning about “*Sophia*”—Human Wisdom

**“18 Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become “fools” so that you may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: “He catches the wise in their craftiness”; 20 and again, “The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.”[b] 21 So then, no more boasting**

about human leaders! All things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas[Peter] or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, 23 and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”

- As Paul concludes his exhortation against human wisdom, he first quotes from Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11 to reinforce his point of the foolishness of human wisdom
  - Job 5:13—“**He catches the wise in their craftiness**”
  - This is a hunting imagery “in which the hunter uses the very craftiness, or cunning, of the prey as the means of capture. The ultimate irony is that people are cunningly avoiding God with whom they have to do; but God has used that very cunning to ensnare them. Thinking themselves to be wise, they are in fact fools.” (Fee, I Corinthians, 152)
  - Psalm 94:11—“**The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.**”
  - Leon Morris points out that the word for “thoughts” are more like reasoning, meaning that human does not just discount God, but they have used their reasoning, their logic which takes God out of the equation, and thus the reasoning leads them to futility!
- Then, Paul reminds them that since we are in Christ, “all things are yours!”
  - The meaning of this statement is best understood based on the last two points: You are Christ’s and Christ is God’s”
  - Indeed the fullness of God is in Christ (Colossians 1:9), and the fullness of Christ is in us (Ephesians 1:23)
  - Thus, all things are ours—
    - whether Paul, Apollos or Peter—they are part of the fullness of Christ that Christ has given to us:
    - the present that includes this world, death and life—in Christ, whatever happens, have been redeemed and meant for our good and
    - the future is certainly ours, as we await our final redemption in Christ Jesus!
  - And the logical conclusion is: we do not need anything (especially human wisdom) or anyone else (Peter, Paul or Apollos) to define ourselves or our identity; our identity is simply defined by the crucified Christ and being in Christ!

#### IV. 4:1 – 4:21 Their Core Issue is Really about Paul

##### 4: 1-5—Human Wisdom spurs Human Judgment

“This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. 2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. 3 I care very little if I am *judged by you (anakrino)* or by any human court; indeed, I do not even *judge myself (anakrino)*. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who *judges me (anakrino)*. 5 Therefore *judge nothing (krino)* before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in

**darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.**

The last verse in chapter 3 is like a “crowning doxological note” which should have concluded Paul’s warning against the elevation of human wisdom, but it appears that Paul is compelled to say a bit more in this respect.

- “These people are not simply *for* Apollos or Peter; they are decidedly *anti*-Paul.” (Fee, 156) and they have been passing judgment on Paul rejecting his authority (as an Apostle) and thus his teaching.
- I have highlighted the two Greek words used in this section:
  - With “*anakrino*” (in vv.3, 4), it does not refer to so much a verdict that has been handed down, as the process of “examination” that leads to a verdict;
  - With “*krino*” (in v.5), it refers to the handing down of a verdict (Fee)

It is important to note the change of metaphors here, as Paul switches from calling himself as “deacon” in 3:5, to “servant” here; the latter is used for “under-rowers” in the below deck of a boat—a helper sort of role, but it evolves later to be used of a “steward” of a large estate—normally a slave who has been honored to take care of a large estate who is not answerable to other slaves, but only to the master.

- With such a usage, Paul says he is the steward of a very important and honored task—steward of the mystery of God which has now been revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.
  - And such a charge, is not just for apostles like him, but for all of us
- But the important thing is: we need to be faithful to our charge, but whether one is faithful is ultimately a matter for our Master, the Lord.
- Applying to himself, Paul is very upfront with the Corinthians in that
  - They have been examining Paul, passing all kinds of judgment on him
  - But he does not care (not that he is not hurt, but he is not moved)
  - And, with a rather serious tone, Paul says even if they convene a formal examination in a legal court (having one’s “day” in court), he really is not afraid, why?
  - The final and ultimate examiner is the Lord—His examination is all that counts, so even if Paul examines himself and finds himself “faithful”, he knows that is not the final verdict—this does not mean Paul would not seek to examine himself before the Lord; I am sure he does all the time, to make sure his motives (v.5) are pure before the Lord, but that he would not base on his own judgment to earn the “Praise from God”.
- Applying to the Corinthians, He cautions them not to “*krino*”—pass verdicts on anything, i.e. it might be “natural” to apply judgment (in terms of right or wrong), but to go beyond that to pronounce verdicts is certainly unwise:
  - Because we cannot and should not guess one’s motive which is hidden, and
  - Only God can, and He will on that **Day**—the coming of the Lord!

#### 4: 6-7—Paul using Apollos and himself as example

**6 Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. 7 For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?**

- While Paul would urge them to learn from him later (v.16), he first explains his attitude behind all these warnings:
  1. He is not teaching them anything that he does not apply to himself and
  2. In applying all these to Apollos and himself, his motto in teaching is: **“Do not go beyond what is written”** (the exact word used by Jesus in His answer to the tempter in Matthew 4—referring to the Scriptures)
  3. Since we all base our lives and our teachings on “What is written”, all of our spiritual knowledge is “received”, if not “received” we would definitely have gone beyond what is written, and so
  4. Where is the boasting?
    - Occasionally, I heard some teachers or preachers remark that their teachings are something that the hearers would never have heard before—it is simply a case of either
      - The speaker is ignorant that some former saints have already said so, just that they are ignorant of it, or
      - If it is really something new, it is likely heresy—they have gone beyond what is written!”

#### 4: 8-13—Shaming the Corinthians

**8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign (become kings)—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign (to be kings) so that we also might reign (be kings) with you! 9 For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. 10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! 11 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. 12 We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 13 when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.**

One can sense that the Apostle Paul is getting personal, and is less restrained in his words, as he really wants them to heed his warning “for their own benefit” (4:6).

- From all the reports Paul has heard, the arrogance of the Corinthian Christians has elevated themselves over other churches (as if they were the elites among Christians, while other churches, their leaders included, like the Apostles, were inferior because of the Corinthians' intellectual and philosophical sophistication). As a result, he feels the need to bring them down to the ground, or down from their pedestal, so to speak. How?
- By reminding them what true Christianity is at the present, but he first confronts them with their arrogance of thinking "they have already arrived" or some call, "over-realized eschatology".

(1) They thought they have arrived!

- **"You have all you want"**: the word is for being "satiated", needing not to eat any more
  - Meaning, they think they do not need any more teachers, especially Paul; they know everything—this is not exactly uncommon among Christians, especially those who have the opportunity to receive seminary training—not that they would say openly, but their reluctance in receiving teachings from others shows!
- **"Already you have become rich"**: it could be a play on word, yielding a two-fold meaning
  - For one, it likely refers to their richness in gifts (that Paul commends them in 1:5)
    - But here is not a commendation, but a ridicule in that, again, because of their giftedness, they look down upon other churches, and even the Apostles—saying, we lack nothing really!
  - On the other hand, as the church members getting recognition in the society, they might be getting wealthy in the material sense, thus they are not like the Macedonian churches that are poor. Perhaps, they see that being a "brag-able" blessing from God.
- **"You have become kings (literal translation)—and that without us"**: this is a difficult one—what does Paul means by being "kings" and without "us"?
  - I agree with Fee with this refers to the eschatological reign that all believers will reign with Christ, to judge the world (Fee, 173), and
  - The Corinthians see that they have arrived, with all their giftedness (perhaps especially with prophesying and tongue-speaking) and knowledge, they have now become kings to pass judgment even against Paul and other Apostles.
  - "Without us": again speaks to their rejection of Paul and other church leaders outside of the Corinthian church.

(2) The true picture of Christianity on earth—the "Already and Not Yet"



Yes, one day, we will reign (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:4), one day will know fully (1 Cor. 13:12), one day, we will be filled (Eph. 3:19); but in the here and now, Paul reminds them what life in the Kingdom is like, using his own situation to compare with theirs:

- The implication is, because of their faithfulness to their charge of being entrusted with the mystery of God (the gospel):
- **“it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.”**
  - Most commentators see this as using the imagery of a condemned criminal being brought as the last act into the gladiators’ arena (hence the word “theatre” which is translated “spectacle”)
  - The apostles are now playing out that procession (which for Paul comes to reality in the reign of Nero in the mid-60’s) for all the see (the whole universe—that include angels and human beings)—this procession is even watched intently by angels in heavens.
- The contrast with the Corinthian Christians could not be stronger:
  - **10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ!**
  - **We are weak, but you are strong!**
  - **You are honored, we are dishonored!**
  - The implicit question is not what’s wrong with the apostles, but rather what’s wrong with the Corinthian Christians!
- Paul goes on to shame them with what he and others are (willingly) going through for the gospel’s sake: **To this very hour**
- **we go hungry and thirsty,**
- **we are in rags,**
- **we are brutally treated,**
- **we are homeless.**
- **We work hard with our own hands.**
- **When we are cursed, we bless;**
- **when we are persecuted, we endure it;**
- **when we are slandered, we answer kindly.**
  - **We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.**

I encourage you to visit the Voice of the Martyrs website, to get an idea of how Christians in many parts of world (especially in the Islamic regions and regimes hostile to Christianity) are going through—not unlike what Paul was going through then!

Also, remember Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 3:12—**“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”**

4: 14-21—Paul gets personal—I am the one you are against!

**14 I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. 15 Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you to imitate me. 17 For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.**

- To the majority of the Corinthian Christians, Paul knows that with the above words, they would definitely feel ashamed, but at this point, Paul has no intention to shame them, but rather
  - He does it out of a fatherly love, and spiritually speaking, he is their father, as Christ has used him to convert them;
  - So he urges them to heed, and even imitate his example (which he just honestly shares with them) since he is their spiritual father; and
  - Because he teaches what he is living out and Timothy can testify to this fact.
  - In an indirect way, Paul is saying that as harsh as some of his words are, this is how he also teaches “everywhere in every church”—do not take it personally!

**18 Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. 20 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. 21 What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?**

- But to some of them who obviously do not regard Paul as their spiritual father, Paul has some strong words to warn them:
  - It appears that they think that Paul is all talk, and are afraid to face them personally, and thus is sending Timothy instead;
  - It is also likely that Paul has previously promised to come (perhaps in his former letter) and yet, he still has not, after quite a few years from his last visit (he has been in Ephesus alone for over 2 years).
  - But Paul assures them that he will definitely come (but still conditions that with “if the Lord is willing”—an attitude that we all should emulate).
  - However, he urges them to heed his exhortations, lest when he comes, they will face “a rod of discipline”
    - While we have no idea what this “threat” is, but Paul is sufficiently confident that he would come in God’s power—not with “talk”
    - Of course, when Paul arrives, he will definitely teach them the Word of God, but Paul is confident that his preaching would demonstrate the convicting power of the gospel which, in his experience, will lead them to repentance, or at least, leave them without words!