

4:1-5 Ministry and criticism

1 Paul uses two highly appropriate terms to describe the role of teachers in the church—*servants*, lit. ‘employees’, and *those entrusted*, lit. ‘stewards’. The first carries with it the sense of personal answerability to Christ in whose service the person is engaged. The second refers to the lynch-pin activity of the crucial servant in a household whose task it was to transfer the resources of the owner to the members of his household according to their needs. What Paul has been entrusted with are *the secret things of God*, *i.e.* the wisdom of God referred to in the previous chapter. He is a transferer of truth.

2 Certain qualities were sought in secular stewards. In the Christian context it is trustworthiness that is demanded—the record of untrustworthiness in the secular world is well documented. **3a** Paul cares little for the judgment of others, be they from the Christian community or from any human court (*cf.* 2:1-5 and Acts 17:19-34, where judgments were passed on public speakers). **3b-5** Although he knows of no inappropriate conduct in his Christian ministry, Paul is emphatic that it is the Lord who is his judge, and concludes with the command that they are to judge nothing before the time, *i.e.* the Day of the Lord. It is Christ who will expose attempts to cover up misdeeds and will judge not merely actions but motivation. It is at that time that each will receive his praise, *i.e.* his commendation, from God. As 2 Cor. 10:10-13 shows, the Corinthians were slow to learn that lesson; the church subsequently has not done any better.

4:6-13 Ministry and status

The connection with 4:1-5 is clear. The congregation’s comparisons of

Paul and Apollos (a judgment made prematurely) have a direct bearing on the future of the ministries of both men in Corinth (see the discussion on 16:12 which shows that the congregation had written asking specifically for the return of Apollos to Corinth). **6a** *I have applied these things* refers to the literary device called a “covert allusion” which was used to refer to a person or situation indirectly and was a form of irony. Paul employs that device here, using irony to great effect, although as the discussion unfolds there is in fact nothing covert about his intentions. He uses this device so that the congregation should learn the meaning of the saying *Do not go beyond what is written*. This refers to the OT Scriptures, to which Paul often refers in chs. 1-4. The conduct of the Christian church was bound by the Scriptures. Certainly that is the case in Paul’s indictment of the Corinthians, for Scripture has played a decisive role in Paul’s assessment of the Christians who idolized secular wisdom and oratory. Paul is about to redress their conduct by pricking their consciences into a change of thinking and conduct. **6b** What they have been doing is now clearly spelt out, for each has been taking pride in one teacher at the expense of the other. **7** By asking three intimidating questions, he teaches them to avoid unscriptural conduct. The first relates to 1:30 where God’s work in Christ is what makes them who they are. The second relates to the thanksgiving section in 1:4-9, where they have been reminded that they have been enriched in every way in Christ, and especially with respect to the abundance of the gifts they have been given. The third explains why their boasting is totally inappropriate, for their gifts were not self-generated nor did they arise from privilege or status, even though their boasting would suggest that they did.

After these questions, which should effectively eliminate all

boasting by Christians, comes Paul's use of irony in vs 8-13. Here Paul draws contrasts between the Corinthian Christians and the apostles. **8** Orators and those of the upper social strata boasted about their self-sufficiency secured through their wealth and their political power which enabled them to live as liberated people (see Philo, *The Worse overcomes the Better* 32-34). Paul declares ironically that the Christians are also behaving thus *and that without us*. He only wished they were kings so that he could be a king as well. **9** That is not the case for God has placed the apostles in a position of ignominy—like captured slaves who made up the end of the procession in Roman victory parades before they were slaughtered. Apostles were not only a spectacle before men but before the whole unseen world. **10** Paul now [*p. 1167*] compares the 'social' status descriptions of the *not many* referred to in 1:26 with the Corinthian Christians, and the social status of the many whom *God chose* (1:27-28) with that of the apostles. **11** Even to this point they have been meted out the same treatment as prisoners of war. **12-13** While the social class boasted that they had never worked with their hands, Paul had (*cf.* 9:6). The apostles' response to the ignominy heaped upon them has been to endure it, and even to reply with blessing when abused.

4:14-17 Paul the apostle as their father

Just as the secular authorities of the Roman colony of Corinth recorded on inscriptions that Julius Caesar was its founding father, and recognized the jurisdiction of the present emperor by attributing the same title to him, so too Paul uses the image of the founding father of the Christian community to commend imitation of himself. **14** To be the recipient of criticism in such a culture was deeply shameful. Paul assures the

Corinthians his aim is not to humiliate, but rather to warn them *as my dear children*. **15** Rich Corinthians had servants, *guardians*, who accompanied young sons to school and looked after them. Paul assures the Christians that they too have many such protectors, but it cannot be said they have many fathers. Paul declares that he himself has the relationship of a father to them because *in Christ* he had brought them into being *through the gospel*. **16** On this basis he encourages them to become imitators of him. This imitation should not be like that of the disciples of teachers, who imitated the way they dressed, walked and taught, but rather that of bearing ignominy on behalf of the message of the cross. **17** Timothy, Paul's *faithful* colleague and dear *son*, is coming to remind them of Paul's way of life in Christ Jesus which he teaches *everywhere in every church*. Paul did not merely teach the nature of true discipleship, but was able to put life and doctrine together and expected all Christians to imitate him.

4:18-21 The options facing the Corinthians

The kingdom of God is not an armchair philosophy, but is about power—power to change (*cf.* 6:9-11). The choice is theirs (21). Either they repent of their conduct which would enable Paul to come in a spirit of love and gentleness, or he will come like the secular governor did with his lictors who bore the rods as signs of their authority to inflict punishment.

In this long section, 1:4-4:21, Paul has dealt with the issue of the Christian's right attitude to ministry. This must be perceived as gospel-oriented ministry and not some form of Christian leadership which simply replicated secular models and apparently commended itself to the culturally conscious Corinthian Christians. Paul does not use the term

'leader' because of its elitist and political connotations which were totally out of keeping with Christian ministry. He had no clients or followers like the secular patrons. The church had failed to perceive and benefit from the ministry Christ ordained for the church and the world, and as a result their corporate Christian life had deteriorated. It was first on his agenda for very good reasons. Much depended on their developing maturity in this matter but they were slow to do so. Throughout the history of the church these problems have frequently recurred.

5:1-6:20 Moral issues

5:1-8 Immorality and the church's legitimate sphere of discipline

The first report was of divisions (1:11), the second relates to incest (5:1). It is sometimes thought that the immorality committed by this member of the church was endorsed by other Christians. That is only an assumption. The text does not say that the members were boasting because of his immorality. It would seem that the person who committed this sin was someone of high status and it was that which earned the applause of other Christians and not his gross immorality. Under Roman law this person was liable to banishment from this prestigious Roman colony for such conduct if he were brought to court. As no public prosecution service existed, a private prosecution would be required. Such legal proceedings could only be undertaken by a person of equal or higher status. Society and the church often turn a blind eye to the 'indiscretions' of socially powerful members but for the church this has always meant great spiritual loss.

1 The crime is incest with *his father's wife*. The term *has* is a

common euphemism for sexual intercourse (*cf.* 7:2 and discussion). It may or may not be his natural mother—it could be a stepmother. Roman law was intolerant of such conduct, as were other legal codes (*cf.* Dt. 22:30).

2 Instead of being proud of this man because of his social status, the congregation should have excluded him from their fellowship.

3 Paul, as the founding apostle, passes judgment on such conduct as if he were actually present—*I am with you in spirit*.

4 He invokes the strongest judgment, calling upon the church to assemble in the name of, (*i.e.* in the character and power of), the Lord Jesus, and to be conscious of Paul's presence as judge. The power of the Lord Jesus, apparently invoked through prayer, will be present for the purpose [*p. 1168*] of handing this man over to Satan (5), *i.e.* excluding him from the believing earthly community for the destruction of his *sinful nature*, lit. 'the flesh' (*cf.* Gal. 6:8; 11:30-32). This man is not regarded as a non-Christian. The purpose of the community's action is the salvation of his soul at the judgment.

6 The boasting of the Corinthians with respect to this person is condemned as it has been elsewhere (*cf.* chs. 1-4).

7 The reason for excommunication is based in part on the OT's festival of unleavened bread (*cf.* Ex. 12:15-20) when the yeast with its impregnating capacity in bread-making was not to be used in preparing the Passover bread. Instead the permeating yeast was thrown away, and by implication the offending person must be excluded from the sphere of the community. The reason for this is that *Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed*. **8** The festival of rejoicing in the light of Christ's death must now be celebrated not with the infiltrating influence of malice and

wickedness, but with sincerity and truth.

5:9-13 The church's sphere of judgment

9 Paul had written a previous letter which had been misunderstood (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 which has also been wrongly used to demand Christian separation from secular society). It had ruled on associating with immoral people.

10 Paul corrects any misunderstanding that he had condemned contacts in secular society with immoral people, those greedy for gain, the swindlers or idolaters. If this were the case, then Christians would have to withdraw from the world in the manner of certain religious sects in Judaism e.g. the Therapeutae and the Essenes.

11 Paul now clarifies what had been previously misunderstood—they are to withdraw from any Christian who is sexually immoral, greedy for money (i.e. covetous), an idolater, a drunkard (ancient dinners were notorious for their drinking and immorality cf. the discussion on 10:7), or dishonest business person. Table fellowship was prohibited.

12 It is interesting that Paul did not see himself as a judge of secular society's conduct. In a question which demanded an answer in the affirmative, Paul states that the Christian community is responsible for judging the insider, i.e. its own members.

13 It is for God to judge the inappropriate conduct of the outsider, while the community is to expel the immoral person from their midst, a point Paul emphasizes by citing Dt. 17:7. The ease with which the present day church often passes judgment on the ethical or structural misconduct of the outside community is at times matched only by its reluctance to take action to remedy the ethical conduct of its own members. We have reversed Paul's order of things.

6:1-8 Lawsuits among members

Among the elite of first-century society it was quite acceptable to institute civil proceedings before a magistrate and jury on trivial matters in order to establish one's social and political superiority over others. In weighing up their decision in such cases the jury had to take into account the status and power of the opposing parties, and the judge had to act likewise in imposing fines. Furthermore, certain persons were excluded from instituting legal proceedings against others; *i.e.* a son against his father, a slave against his master, a freedman against his patron, a citizen against the magistrate, and an inferior against his social superior. Judges and juries were regularly bribed by participants in a case. Mediation rather than litigation could be used in Jewish and Graeco-Roman courts. This was the preferred option of some because leading citizens feared the damaging effects of litigation on their social standing and public careers. Enmity was also engendered, for those who voted against the defendant automatically became his enemies. Civil litigation for the elite was simply seen as an extension of factions and discord in political life.

Characteristically Paul begins the discussion with a series of questions which operates both to interrogate and teach (*cf.* ch. 9 where he asks nineteen questions). **1** In the light of the way local courts operated it is little wonder that Paul is appalled that some Christians *dare* to *take* civil actions before annually elected magistrates and wealthy compatriots. They acted as either judge and jury with great partiality and could also be bribed. **2** If the *saints* are to judge the world (*cf.* Dn. 7:22) then they are surely competent to act as mediators in the civil actions which Paul calls *trivial cases*. The term used suggests that their civil litigation is vexatious rather than settling genuine matters. **3** Paul again

uses a favourite argument form, *Do you not know...*(*cf.* v 2), to indicate that if the angels are to be judged by the saints, surely the latter can resolve these disputes. **4** In the event of disagreement, Paul asks, ‘do you appoint as judges men of little account in the church?’ This alternative translation offered by NIV (mg.) is to be preferred. While secular judges were people of high status in the community, in the Christian gathering secular status had no place. Paul uses the same term here as he does in 1:28 of those whom secular society despises.

5 Some of those who were wise (*cf.* 3:18) might undertake the role of mediator which was an accepted way to resolve matters in secular courts. The third stage of education in the first century trained students in legal studies and [*p. 1169*] therefore there would be some in the church who were legally competent to resolve matters equitably.

6 Paul indicates his revulsion at their actions by the words *brother... against another* (brother) which signify the fellowship of believers—*and this in front of unbelievers!*

7 The fact that matters could not be resolved when a brother has a dispute against another Christian is a sign of defeat for the Christian community.

8 It is better to suffer wrong rather than go to court. Not only was dirty linen being washed in public but a fine was imposed on whoever lost the case—hence his accusation *you... cheat and do wrong*—better ‘defraud.’

In Rom. 13:1-7 Paul discusses the God-ordained role of the state in criminal cases, but he has no place for the locally elected magistrates and juries who used the civil actions as a political arena. Christians who were legally trained and acting as mediators would resolve issues in a just way in a society where unjust conventions prevailed.

6:9-20 Against Christian libertarianism

In Rom. 1:18-32 Paul's list of transgressions which invoke God's judgment does not include only sexual sins, (see vs 29-31). Here too, those sins which excluded members from the OT believing community, also exclude them from God's inheritance, (9b-10). Secular society had developed a sophisticated philosophical argument which endorsed the loose-living lifestyle of the elite. Their misdemeanours may have been beyond the arm of the secular law, but not of God's assize. There was clearly a measure of self-deception on the part of Christians as there often is today. The sexually immoral, (pornoï, which includes fornicators i.e. unmarried Christians cohabiting), worshippers of idols, men who cheat on their wives however much their wives tolerate this, the participants in male homosexuality, thieves, the greedy, (lit. 'the covetous') who are dissatisfied with God's goodness to them, those who are drunkards (normally those who went on drinking orgies at dinners), and people who are dishonest in business—all these have no inheritance in God's kingdom. None of these sins ever strengthens relationships with God or with others; as in the Ten Commandments, they are prohibited because they are destructive and unhelpful to relationships, and inflict grief and anguish.

11 Such were the activities of the Corinthians. They were no more or no less immoral than the rest of the society. As then, so now. But the work of Christ has cleansed them from their past, made them saints, justified, i.e. acquitted them from just judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and this by means of the activity of God's Spirit. This good news of the gospel means that past sinful activity need not determine the ultimate destiny of men and women.

12 Paul quotes popular libertine slogans which he counters with

similar succinct sayings. The elite argued that their success enabled them to do as they wished, for everything was lawful, but Paul requires ethics that enhance and do not exploit—not everything is beneficial i.e. ethics that bestow blessings on others. They argued that everything was permissible—there were no restraints. Paul insists that actions must never enslave.

13 They argued that food was made for eating and the stomach was made for food. The perusal of first-century cookbooks shows how sophisticated the sin of gluttony was. Immorality and gluttony went hand in hand at pagan feasts. Paul counters that neither food nor the appetite are indestructible. The body is not meant to engage in sex outside marriage, but in the case of the Christian, his body belongs not to himself to do as he wishes, for it was made for the Lord.¹⁴ Paul rejects Plato's argument that the senses could be indulged now because they could not be indulged in death. However, God intends to resurrect bodies, not souls, for he raised the Lord from the dead.¹⁵ No Christian could say 'my body', for it is not the spirit but the whole person who is joined to Christ at conversion. Christians who are called members of Christ can never unite in sex with a prostitute. 16 Such behaviour, although accepted as the norm for men in the Roman world, was always precluded in the church because of the unity any sexual act establishes between two people. Paul cites the sexual ordinance in Gn. 2:24—there is never any instance of special pleading for adultery in the Bible.²⁰ No Christian person can say 'my body' for he has been bought with a price i.e. ransomed by Christ's death. The clear implication is that his task is to honour, lit. 'glorify' God in his body, and this is done by relating to others both socially and sexually within the relational parameters laid down in the Bible.

