

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

### Conceit: The Root Of Divisions I Corinthians 4:6-21

Benjamin Franklin said, "The proud hate pride -- in others." That was the exact problem of the Corinthian Christians. They were puffed up with pride which manifested itself in conceit. They were glorying in their preachers Paul, Apollos, Peter - rather than Christ. They were exalting their own human wisdom which fed their pride. They had become conceited because they actually believed they had arrived spiritually under the tutelage of their particular preacher-hero when in actuality they were babes in Christ who needed much spiritual growth. The irony was the Corinthians hated the pride they thought they saw in the Apostle Paul but could not see the glaring pride and conceit in their own lives. In 4:6-21, Paul will give a warning to these Corinthians concerning pride, self-sufficiency and complacency which was evident in their church.

#### THE CAUSE OF CONCEIT 4:6-7

Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit. Paul used himself and Apollos as examples or illustrations to demonstrate that all ministers are instruments in the band of God. Obviously the whole Corinthian church had divided up to follow their particular leader. What Paul has said and is about to say about himself and Apollos were designed to teach them lessons about humility.

So that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written," No one knows for sure what this means but it most likely implies that Paul, Apollos and Peter were an object lesson to the Corinthians that they were not to think of leaders above that which was written in the Old Testament where worldly wisdom is considered folly and all of God's ministers are called servants. We should never glory in God's leaders because God is a jealous God who will not share His glory with any mere man.

Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. We learn here that the bottom line problem at Corinth was not the superficial things such as human reasoning and preacher worship, but that it was pride. The followers of Apollos exalted themselves over those of Paul and those of Paul over Peter. One brother not only thought himself superior to another but also assumed a hostile attitude towards him. They were full of pride and puffed up with conceit, each thinking he had the best leader; consequently, they looked down their noses at those who did not follow the same leader they did or those who did not act or think like they did. They reeked with conceit.

The Corinthians were puffed up over preacher worship and they were also puffed up over spiritual gifts. First Corinthians 1:7 says, "Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift." They had all twenty-one of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament. They thought they had acted spiritually because they had a great deal of human knowledge and had experienced the mystical gift of tongues. They had all the gifts, yet they were a messed up church, filled with pride and rotten lives. This shows us that an active local church with exciting meetings and with all the spiritual gifts manifested is not necessarily a godly, committed, maturing body of Christians.

It is possible for Christians to think they have arrived spiritually and don't need other people to teach them, encourage them, correct them or lead them. A Christian never completely arrives spiritually in this life no matter how far he has progressed in spiritual maturity. There is always room for growth. "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect (spiritually mature) but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Philip. 3:12).

Christians can get proud over so many things. It may be the wealth of the church, the status people in the church, the strong teaching, a particular doctrinal emphasis, its missionary thrust, its type of worship or its size. Remember, pride goes before destruction. Pride is the root of divisions, conflicts and dissensions in the life of the local church and between believers in Christ.

"We feed pride into our system when we continue to pump ourselves up with a bunch of self-centered hot air. Pride has several devastating results--all of which interfere with the fellowship into which God has called us. 1) Pride cuts ourselves off from God--for who needs God if we are self-sufficient within ourselves? 2) Pride cuts ourselves off from others, for who needs to be dependent upon others if in our pride we are independent? 3) Pride cuts ourselves off from ourselves, for it does not permit us to face accurately our own self-evaluation. 4) Pride cuts ourselves off from service. No wonder God hates pride. And no wonder we read that pride comes before a fall (Knofel Staton, I Corinthians).

For who makes you different from anyone else? Pride led these Corinthians to great conceit. They thought their little group was superior because they themselves were superior and were following a superior leader. Paul repressed their conceit by asking, "For who makes you different from anyone else? It is God who makes them different. Being different does not mean that one is superior to another.

What do you have that you did not receive? Paul further repressed their conceit by showing everything a Christian or a minister has is by the grace of God; therefore, they have no grounds to think of themselves as superior to anyone. Furthermore, if they had any apparent superiority, it was not due to themselves but to God who gave them gifts and abilities. Absolutely everything we are and have is due to God's grace: There is no room for conceit in any Christian.

And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? Paul continued to repress their conceit by reminding them there is no room for boasting in a Christian because everything comes from the hand of a loving, sovereign God.

Paul's point is clear. It is prideful conceit which causes conflicts and before we can solve conflicts with other Christians or heal divisions within a local church, we must first deal with our pride and conceit. Think about this for a moment. The first conflict in the universe was between God and Lucifer and the root was Lucifer's pride and conceit. The conflict between Cain and Abel, which was the first conflict in the world, was caused by pride and conceit. The conflict between David and King Saul started when Saul heard the women in the city say, "Saul has killed his thousands but David his tens of thousands," and the root was pride and conceit. These things lead to a superiority attitude and also to great jealousy when someone outshines us. The result is always conflict and division.

### THE RESULTS OF CONCEIT 4:8-13

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! One of the obvious teachings in the New Testament is that the Christian spiritually and positionally possesses now which will be actually and factually his in the future kingdom. This is called "realized eschatology." It views everything from the "already but not yet" perspective. However, the Corinthians had an "over-realized eschatology." They thought they had arrived spiritually; they were in their opinion well on the way to perfection. They placed their emphasis on the already with little or no emphasis upon the not yet.

The whole section of 4:8-13 is filled with irony and sarcasm. Paul never watered down his words. He drew a contrast between the wretched state of the Apostles and that of the Corinthians in their ease. Pride and conceit does not lead to a spiritual church but to a self-sufficient, complacent church as seen in the Corinthians. In verse eight, Paul mocked their conceit. The Corinthians thought they were already filled; that is, they had arrived in the kingdom and were satiated and satisfied. Outwardly they lacked nothing; they felt no want. They were very secure and self-sufficient and self-satisfied because in their conceit they thought they had it made. They perceived themselves as mature and godly when in actuality they were immature baby Christians and ungodly. Their own pride blinded them to their true spiritual condition. They were much like the Church of Laodicea in the Book of Revelation:

"You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17).

Apparently the Laodiceans had a tremendous church budget, plenty of money, could do pretty much what they wanted and had no apparent financial needs, not even the need for God because they had no need to trust Him. Affluence can destroy an individual Christian or a church if either stops trusting God.

You have become kings -- and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! These Corinthians were so filled with conceit they acted like they were kings already reigning with Christ in the future kingdom. They really thought themselves and the church to be something special. They thought they had arrived spiritually. They had it made. They thought they had learned all truth and there was nothing Paul or anyone else could teach them that they didn't know already. They had no need for other ministers or believers to teach them because they were so far advanced in their knowledge and spirituality. They were the "without us" crowd. They had no need for the body of Christ, for ministers or for anyone. Their attitude was, "Who needs you?" Their conceit led them to a fierce independent spirit so as to make them free-lance Christians. Their pride, conceit, arrogance and vanity over being superior Christians was nauseating to God and it ruined their testimony before men. Paul said that he wished they were kings reigning in the future kingdom. If they were, then he and the other apostles would not have to endure all the sufferings for Christ they were then undergoing, for they would all be reigning together as perfected Christians.

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. Paul began to subtly embarrass the Corinthians about their conceit by giving an account of the Apostles' experiences which were filled with humble acts. By showing these humble acts, Paul implied the Corinthians had fallen into a state of complacency, indifference and apathy because of their conceit. The Apostles were men condemned to death, a spectacle, on exhibition. The imagery behind this would have been a common sight to anyone living in the Roman Empire. It is the picture of a conquering Roman Caesar or general. As he returns from a victorious battle, he arrives at the palace in triumphant procession. Citizens line the roadway and archway leading to the palace. There are garlands, the tossing of flowers and money, and shouts of praise and acclamation as the returning general comes home. Behind the general in this parade are the proud soldiers who participated in the battle and last in the procession are the prisoners who were made captive in the conflict and who were condemned to certain death before Caesar and the public. As these prisoners moved along, bound in chains and dressed in rags, the people jeered, mocked and harassed them by spitting on them, punching them and throwing garbage or whatever on them. It was a humiliating experience because some of the prisoners may have been generals, officers or dignitaries in the defeated army. These captives would be put to death in a Roman arena either as a gladiator or thrown to the lions.

We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. Paul looked at himself and all the Apostles as men condemned to die with all comforts and rights denied them. The word "spectacle" is from the word from which we get our English word "theater." The Apostles were on exhibition as if on a vast stage before the unsaved world and viewed as stupid men, suffering for a fairy-tale cause.

Because the Apostles were condemned men, they had a different view of life. A condemned man doesn't really care who wins the Super Bowl or whether the President is a Republican or Democrat. Nor does he care about material things. A man sentenced to death is interested in relationships, making sure everything is right with his fellow man. He is concerned about eternity and how he will face death. He wants to make every moment count with his loved ones. Paul and all the Apostles lived in the reality of life, not dealing with trivial things, but putting their time on spiritual things which count for eternity.

The Apostles were the least, the last and the most afflicted of men. The Corinthians were displaying an attitude of being the first, the most and living out their Christian lives with ease.

We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! To serve Christ, the Apostles had to be willing to be called fools by the world. Their devotion for Christ caused the world to think of them as odd and strange. The Corinthians thought they were wise, but they were actually ignorant and spiritually pitiful.

No Christian who lives for Christ will ever get along with the world. He will always be unpopular with some crowds. A true Christian will have people laugh, ridicule, sneer and mock at times. No Christian likes to suffer for Christ, but it constitutes the great test of life: whether we are willing to bear reproach for Christ and His kingdom. It is possible for any Christian or church to do exactly what the Corinthians did -- compromise, accommodate, sell out so the world will respect the Christian and not laugh at him any more. When a Christian is highly respected and honored by the world, then he has lost his testimony to the world. Often the most brilliant Christian will be looked upon as the village idiot by his unsaved colleagues.

We are weak, but you are strong! The Apostles were weak and in constant need of fellowship with Christ and the body of Christ, but the Corinthians thought themselves strong, needing nothing and no one. They were "Lone Ranger" Christians.

You are honored, we are dishonored! The Corinthians were objects of honor and praise in the eyes of the world; the Apostles were held in utter contempt. Christians compromise the faith not because of intellectual problems but because they want respectability in the eyes of the world. Behind most compromise is the unwillingness to be laughed at by the world. Christians cannot get it through their thick skulls that to be a follower of Christ means persecution from the world. Sharing in Christ's suffering becomes a major way Christians share in Christ's glory.

"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. ." (II Tim. 3:12).

"If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (Jn. 15:19).

"Now if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Rom. 8:17).

To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. The Apostles underwent all kinds of hardships, even being physically beaten and homeless, while the Corinthians sat back in pure comfort and luxury and did nothing to further the cause of Christ. That the Apostles would subject themselves to these hardships to preach Christ was indeed foolishness in the eyes of the world. Today a Christian will be thought of as stupid if he yields everything to Christ. Those who will think him most stupid are professing Christians with no inward reality of Christ.

We work hard with our own hands. Paul did hard labor with his hands to help support himself in the ministry. Now that was the depth of humility to the Greek because a Greek would not condescend to do manual labor. For that was the work of a slave. In their conceit and pride, the Corinthians would never dirty their hands in work, but the humble spirit of the Apostles shamed the Corinthians.

When we are cursed, we bless; Terrible things were said about and to the faces of the Apostles, yet they spoke well of their opponents, even giving a prayer for them. They followed the example of Christ. "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (I Pet. 2:23). In their pride and conceit, the Corinthians fought back and said awful things when attacked verbally by their opponents because they had to defend their Greek honor and protect their egos.

When we are persecuted, we endure it; When the Apostles were persecuted and beaten, they endured and persevered in silence, trusting God to deal with their persecutors.

When we are slandered, we answer kindly. The Apostles tried to console and pray for those who said evil things about them. They did not try to defend or justify their actions, but committed the slanderers to God. When we bless, endure and answer kindly to our opponents, we are acting in the way Christ acted. We cannot control how people act towards us but we can control how we react to people when they treat us badly.

Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. The Apostles were considered the filth of society, the vilest of all men. Why would they put up with this treatment? Because they found Christ, and while the world may have looked at them as dung, they had found the answer to life. "What is more, I considered everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ. . ." (Philip. 3:8). When a Christian is treated like rubbish, like garbage or like dung, he should not try to get even, but should commit the situation to God. There is a familiar saying today: "I don't get mad; I just get even." This is the wrong attitude. Committing the situation to God seems to be the true Christian life style and response to bad treatment.

## THE CURE FOR CONCEIT 4:14-21

I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. The first cure for conceit is to heed admonition. Paul's sternness turned to tenderness. He didn't want the Corinthians to feel only shame; he wanted to warn them of pride and a self-sufficient attitude. At the point of sharpest censure, Paul called them "dear children." The word for "warn" in the Greek is *neutheo* which gives the idea of confronting Christians with wrongdoing in order to lead them into the correct way of life. Paul had been correcting the Corinthians for their wrong thinking, wrong attitudes, wrong actions—things which were contrary to the Word of God and he did that to rectify their rebellious ways.

Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Although the Corinthians had many tutors (Apollos, Peter), they had only one spiritual father, and that was Paul. The word "guardian" is the Greek word *pedagogue* meaning a slave who was given the responsibility for training the child and giving schooling. He did not belong to the family and was subordinate to the child's father. Though he might love the child dearly, there were no natural ties. His father had begotten the child and child's welfare was ultimately in his hands. Because Paul was their spiritual father, they were to listen to him. They were to heed his warning. The second cure for conceit is to listen to others about our conceit and then seek to do something about it.

Therefore I urge you to imitate me. The third cure for conceit is to be humble. Paul is not saying they should be followers of him rather than of Apollos or Peter, for that would contradict everything he has said in the first four chapters of First Corinthians. He wants these people to have the same humble attitude the Apostles displayed when they were slandered, persecuted, poorly treated, called fools and thought of as condemned men. Paul and all the Apostles held themselves in low esteem. They, especially Paul, set a very good example and could say, "Be imitators of me." The Corinthians were babies in Christ and were to stop imitating other babies. They were to follow the actions of those more mature in Christ. Was Paul conceited when he said, "Imitate me"? He is merely stating men will follow what a person does and not so much what he says. We can talk our heads off but if our lives do not back up what we say others will not follow. A man who does not live what he says is really saying it doesn't matter what he believes and life isn't that important. In another place in this book Paul tells us the secret of his humble life. "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (I Cor. 11:1). He is saying to these Corinthians, "You imitate me because I'm imitating Christ, and when you imitate me, you are imitating Christ." It is this Christlike humility that eliminates conceit and pride.

For this reason I am sending 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. Paul planned to send Timothy to them to remind them of his manner of life so they could imitate his example of following Christ. Timothy, who had a much different personality than Paul, was Paul's "trouble shooter." Timothy was more timid and less confrontational than Paul, so he could say things to the Corinthians about Paul that Paul himself could never say. Timothy was to bring to their attention the things Paul taught in every church. Paul was no harder on them than he was on any other church he had founded. He longed to see all the churches conform their behavior to Christ

Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. At Corinth there were some leaders and their followers who definitely opposed Paul, and he says these people were filled with boastful pride and arrogance. Apparently these enemies of Paul within the church said that he was a coward and would not face them and that was the reason he was sending Timothy.

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. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. Paul planned to come to them soon if the Lord willed it, for his whole life was lived in the consciousness of God's sovereignty and leading in his life. When he got there he was going to deal with those arrogant boasters not by their fair speeches but by what they did. He would see if they had any power in their lives, if they were practicing what they preached, if they were sacrificing their time, talents and monies for Christ. When God's spiritual kingdom is truly in one's heart, the evidence will be a life of good works. If there is no power, no good works, no evidences, then there is a good possibility there is no salvation.

The fourth cure for conceit is to live consistently -- to make our lives match our words and to operate on divine power. This produces true Christlike humility. Jonathan Edwards said, "There is no man so much out of Satan's reach as a humble man."

What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit? Paul gave the Corinthians a choice. Whether he would come in love or with stern discipline depended solely on whether they were ready to deal with the situation. They were given the liberty to choose. If they dealt with their pride, conceit and preacher worship, Paul would come in love. If they refused to deal with their conceit and divisions, he would come wielding a rod of discipline. The fifth cure for conceit is to choose obedience. All men have hearts with pride and conceit, some more than others, but if they choose to deal with it, they will be blessed by God and not come under discipline.

## CONCLUSION

If you are not a Christian, before you become one you must take a great step of humility. You must admit you are a sinner; you must acknowledge that no good works can save you; you must face up to the fact that all you believe about spiritual things is wrong. To become a Christian, you must admit you have been wrong and you must humble yourself before a sovereign God.

Then you must believe Christ died for you as a sinner. You must trust Him to deliver you from sins consequence which is eternal judgment. You must believe Christ was raised from the dead to give you a righteousness which makes you acceptable to God. You must humble yourself and accept the free gift of salvation in Christ, admitting you can in no way save yourself. This kind of humility brings the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.