



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 Corinthians 4:14–21

1 Corinthians

“The Appeal for Apostolic Imitation”

TRANSCRIPT

Well, I have a note here from the tape ministry. And it's a request for a tape, in fact the latest tape catalog, and—from someone in New Jersey. And then, written above it, “P.S., Is it true that Dr. Johnson went home to be with the Lord?” [Laughter] And then, now, this is obviously an Arminian [laughter continues] and so I think that we should write to him and say, “No, your prayer has not yet been answered. He's still here.” It's interesting most people who greet me after a long time, first question they ask me is, how are you feeling these days? [Laughter, Johnson laughs] Well, it's 7:30. Let's open our class with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the opportunity to again look at the epistle to the Corinthians, the first of them that the Apostle Paul wrote. We thank Thee for its message. We thank Thee for the challenge that it has given to us to esteem the wisdom and the riches of Jesus Christ more than the wisdom of this world. We thank Thee for all that is found in the sacrificial work of our Lord Jesus Christ, and cannot help but notice how different it is in character from the wisdom of the world which seeks to exalt man, to avoid the challenge of the nature of man, his sin, his guilt, his condemnation according to Scripture. We thank Thee that when we turn to the Word of God, we have the true wisdom of God bound up primarily in the cross of Jesus Christ for us. And we thank Thee, Lord, for the encouragement that we have when we read and ponder these words, and by the

Holy Spirit, recognize in them the voice of the Lord our God. We ask that his voice may be heard by us in our inner men and women as the Word of God is taught this afternoon.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] Well, I was so anxious to answer that question that I forgot to put the mike on.

[Laughter] What was that? [Audience member] “How are you feeling?” [Laughter] I'm feeling a little worse for having forgotten. I was so anxious to answer that. [Dr. Johnson laughs]

The subject for tonight is The Appeal for Apostolic Imitation, and we're turning to 1 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 14 through verse 21. Now, I'd like to read the verses, then we'll go back and begin the message. The apostle writes,

“I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though ye might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son, in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power. What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love, and a spirit of gentleness?”

This passage that we just read tonight contains counsel that is rooted in the cross. And of course, it concludes the long opening section of the epistle. I think if I had been a Corinthian listening to the Apostle Paul and if I had anything of the Spirit of God within me, I couldn't help but be ashamed by the things that the apostle has talked about.

In fact, one commentator has said that, “he has written with vehemence and power and a Corinthian with a spark of humanity, not to say Christian conviction, left in him must have blushed to see held up before him, especially in chapter 4, the picture of himself in his conceited self-

importance and the picture of Paul and his apostolic colleagues, the despised, scorned, suffering, but undaunted servants of Christ, the church, and mankind.”

Something for the church to remember is found here, too. Today we tend to glorify numbers. We glorify the kinds of meetings that are pleasing to us. We treat the church service, not as a gathering of the believers to hear the Word of God so much as it is for Christian fellowship and perhaps other things as well. But one can see that in the apostle’s mind, numbers is not the ultimate test of success. And furthermore, there is a warning that we have read about through this section that we need to keep in mind, and that is that the leaders of our churches may build with very poor materials and with shabby workmanship, for that was precisely what was happening in the church at Corinth. The apostle had warned them in verse 12 of chapter 3, “Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear for the day will declare it. Because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test each one’s work of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss. But he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”

So it is possible for us as we teach the Word of God, as we minister the Word of God, as the elders oversee the church, as the deacons serve the church of Jesus Christ, and as our Sunday School teachers work in our Sunday School to build on the foundation of our Lord Jesus Christ and his saving work with poor materials and shabby workmanship.

One of the important ingredients is consistency in what we say we believe and in how we conduct ourselves. It has often been said, “Consistency in creed and conduct, in belief and behavior, and in the doctrinal and moral side of the disciplinary function of the elders of the church.”

Guy King, a favorite devotional writer of the last generation, wrote a little book on James, which he entitled, *A Belief That Behaves*. It’s a very nice epistle, a very nice work on the epistle, and the title itself is the message of the book of James. But it’s a message that the apostle lays stress upon, too.

Now, I want to look at it in a very simple way tonight. And, first of all, we'll look at the first three verses, verse 14, verse 15, and verse 16 under the general theme of Paul, the solemn counselor. He has been uttering some very cutting words to the Corinthians, and they are designed to be a loving reproof of them. You'll notice he has said beginning with verse 6,

“Now, these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes; that ye may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against another. For who makes you to differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? You are already full, you are already rich, you have reigned as kings without us: and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we might also reign with you.”

Now, this is supposed to be a very loving rebuke of the Corinthians, but it's a very sharp-tongued one, because the Corinthians were swollen-headed with pride and self-esteem. And their bombastic ideas are obvious from reading what Paul has to say about them. And furthermore, they have patronized the men who have come to them with the ministry of the Word of God and set them off one against the other.

Remember back in chapter 1 in verse 12, the apostle said, “Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or, ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or, ‘I am of Christ.’” And then again in other places, verse 21 of chapter 1, he has said, “For since in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe underlining the fact that the gospel, according to the world, is not wisdom.”

But according to the Corinthians, evidently, the world and the wisdom of the world was great with them. He wrote on and said, “For Jews request a sign, the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified to the Jews a stumbling block, to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Then in chapter

2, verse 14 through chapter 3, verse 4 he continues that general line. And in chapter 4, verse 6, accuses the Corinthians of being conceited. He says in verse 6, “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written that none of you may be puffed up.” That’s his word for conceit, may not be puffed up, on behalf of one against the other.

He doesn’t stop there either. In verse 18 he says, “Now some are puffed up as though I were not coming to you, but I will come if the Lord wills and I will know not the word of those who are puffed up but the power.” So the Corinthians then, were a professing body of Christians who were the result of the evangelistic ministry of the Apostle Paul. But obviously now Paul is only one of many who has ministered to them and they’re not altogether happy with what he believes, and it’s evident that he’s not altogether happy with them.

In the 14th verse and then following in the 15th verse he says, “I don’t write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children, I warn you.” Now, when he says he doesn’t write these things to shame them, we’re not to think that it would not be within Paul’s province to do that. You might think, “Well, Paul is too nice to write to shame them.” No, that isn’t the way the apostle thought. He thought upon occasion it was perfectly all right to put them to shame, and you don’t have to look far to see it. In the 5th verse of the next chapter—or the 6th chapter, he writes these words, “I say this to your shame, is it not so—or is it so that there is not a wise man among you, not even one who will be able to judge between his brethren.” In Chapter 15 in verse 34, he says something again that indicates he’s not ashamed himself to put them to shame. In chapter 15 in verse 34 he says, “Awake to righteousness and do not sin for some do not have the knowledge of God I speak this to your shame.” So it wasn’t beyond him to say things that put these swollen-headed Corinthians, who had the bombastic ideas, to shame. Sometimes, it is necessary to do that.

Often shame is the beginning of repentance, as you and I know. Because when we realize when we have offended the Lord God, one of the first feelings that we have, I’m sure you’ll agree with me, we’re ashamed. We’re ashamed of something we’ve said; we’re ashamed of something that

we’ve done. And so shame is the first step on the way to recovery often. The Corinthians who were giants in pride were children in faith. And the apostle acts as a father.

It’s one of the things that a father does: he admonishes his children. It’s one of the things that a father has to guard himself against: to admonish too toughly, too strictly. But his duty, as father, is to admonish. That’s one of the things that he must do. So I’m not surprised that the apostle speaks in admonition to them, because fathers, and he is their spiritual father, admonish. And in the 15th verse, he states, “For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

It’s a very interesting expression that the apostle calls himself a father of them. Now, what is interesting about it to me—it’s very simple as far as its meaning is concerned. I’m quite sure most of us understand just that simple sentence to mean that the apostle is calling himself a father because he came to Corinth and he preached the gospel. And through his preaching they came to the knowledge of the Lord. But there is a verse over in Matthew chapter 23 that is called up in my mind at least when I think about this, “For the Lord Jesus said, ‘Do not call anyone on earth your father, for one is your father who is in heaven.’” And here the apostle is calling himself a father, so far as the Corinthians are concerned. But now I think it’s fair to say that Paul is using this metaphorically, because he is speaking about himself as an evangelist and they as converts. And he is not suggesting in any way that they are related to him as a father in the sense that we, as believers in Christ, are related to God our Father in heaven. There is only one father of souls, so the writer of the Epistle of the Hebrews says, and of course that we all recognize I think is true. But Paul here does use the term “father” metaphorically of the work that God did through him with reference to the Corinthians.

“Though you might have ten thousand instructors.” Now, my text has instructors, but that’s the term $\bar{\omega}$ that is used for—well, a slave guardian is the meaning of the term. It’s a reference to the *paidagōgos*. The *paidagōgos* in ancient Greece was the employee of the owner of the property and the father of children who was hired in order to take care of the children. He would be with the children. He would take them to school. He would go get the children when they were ready to come home.

In other words, they performed the task that mothers do now. And not only did he do that, but he was with them constantly, protecting them, keeping them, teaching them as well, and sometimes even giving rather stern threats to the children. So, that individual is a slave guardian. Paul calls them instructors here in this verse. Paul refers again to them in Galatians chapter 3, “For though ye might have then thousand instructors in Christ, slave guardians, (*paidagōgēō*) yet you do not have many fathers for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.”

Now, if you read this in the original text and you understood Greek, you would catch this emphasis. And I’m going to translate it that way, in verse 15, “For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers. For in Christ Jesus I (you) have begotten through the gospel.” Emphasis rests upon the I, I have begotten you, you, you Corinthians through the gospel.

Now, in Hebrew thought—and you can find this in some of the Jewish literature—the individual who taught a person the Torah, the law of Moses, was regarded as a father of that individual. So maybe that thought entered into Paul’s mind as he called himself their father through the work of the Lord through them, “So I have begotten you in Christ Jesus.”

What a difference the apostle is from a person who travels around in our day, preaching the gospel, and moves from one place to another and does not recognize the responsibility that he has to them. The preachers of our present day are preachers often who hire themselves out for their services. And the apostle was a man who followed the guidance of God the Holy Spirit in the work that God gave to him. We’ve lost a great deal when the ministers of the gospel do not follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit fundamentally and first of all, and material things and other things are secondary or tertiary in their mind.

So Paul calls himself a father. He was the one who first preached the gospel to them. But now the church, that he had been the instrument to bring into the knowledge of our Lord, is divided and even, in many cases evidently, was an enemy of the apostle. Now, he says in Christ Jesus he has begotten them. And I think that probably means only in union with Christ does Paul function

effectively. “In Christ,” now that expression may be understood in more than one way. I’m just taking it that way, that “in Christ Jesus,” that is in union with him, “I have begotten you.” I could not beget you otherwise. Paul might say, no man can possibly be a spiritual father to anyone, if God himself, our Lord himself, does not work through that individual. So he’s careful to underline that, “in Christ Jesus, I have begotten you through the gospel.” Outside of him there is only death. So how is it possible for me or anyone else, apart from a relationship with the one who gives life, our God in heaven, bring any other one into the understanding of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we think about the ways in which people come to the knowledge of our Lord, the efficiency of conversion is wrought by Jesus Christ. He is the one, of course, who works. The administrative agency, if we could call it that, is the company of preachers. Now, that means not simply someone who stands behind a pulpit like this or like this, but anyone who holds the Word of God and seeks to lead someone else to the knowledge of the Lord. That individual is a preacher of the gospel.

Now, we know there is a special sense in which he talks about gifted men and so on. But every time you seek to bring someone to the knowledge of the Lord with the gospel, which you know and have experienced, you’re acting as a communicator of the truth. And in that sense, you are an agency in the conversion of others, when that agency is successful. Instrumentally, what we use is the Word of God. In other words, it is Christ’s power. It is the preacher’s preaching, but it is ultimately the Word of God, the inspired Word of God, that the Lord Jesus uses in the conversion of men. He may use it through you or through me. And we’re sinners, but nevertheless it works to the conversion of men when Christ works and when the Word of God is preached.

Now, that tells me a great deal about what we ought to have in our churches. If it is true that in Christ men are begotten, and if it is true that we may be an agency in the preaching of the Word of God, and if it is true it must be through the gospel, through the good news, then it would seem to me preeminent that a church must preach the gospel. Now, that doesn’t mean, I do not think, that he should just simply say Christ died for our sins, on the third day he rose again, and after that he was

seen, in other words, to concentrate entirely on 1 Corinthians 15. The gospel he used in a very broad sense in the early church. It had to do with the good news and all that was bound up in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. So it seems to me that what Paul is saying is that this is the work of the church is to proclaim the gospel. Therefore, the men who stand behind the pulpits, the men and women who stand behind the pulpits, or sit in the chairs and teach the children are to concentrate on the preaching of the Word of God. That's the important thing.

Now, we have the confidence that the Holy Spirit uses that word. And insofar as we offer our petitions to the Lord and ask him to work through his Word in Christ Jesus, we have the assurance that he will do his will through us. So preaching the gospel is the primary work of any attempt to bring men to the knowledge of the Lord. We don't try to bring men to the knowledge of the Lord by other things that the church often gets engaged in. It is through the Word of God.

Now, you might think that if Paul has written a letter to the Corinthians, why is anything else needed? He says, “Though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, you don't have many fathers in Christ Jesus, I've begotten you through the gospel, therefore I urge you, imitate me,” which it would seem, to me incidentally, means that we should do precisely what Paul did and that is go around preaching the gospel. The church should be a mission agency, of course other things too, but it should be a mission agency.

Now, you might think, I say, that the apostle has written the Corinthians and he's told them these things, perhaps everything is therefore done that needs to be done. He's written them a letter. Well, it just lets us know that everything is not resolved by a letter, because the apostle says in verse 17, “For this reason, I have sent Timothy to you.” Well, Paul if you sent a letter, and your letter is so significant as this epistle is, why do you have to send someone along with it? The message is given, isn't it? Well, yes, but the apostle I'm sure would agree that Timothy's going would be a very helpful matter for the Christians in Corinth. And so he sends them, knowing that every problem is not solved by a letter. He sends them his apostolic legate to deal with those who are arrogant, puffed up, the puffed-up Corinthians.

Now, I call Timothy a legate because I think that what the New Testament reveals about Timothy and Titus, and perhaps others, is that they were servants—I mean servants in the sense of being a representative, not servants in the sense of being a slave, but servants in the sense of a representative of the Apostle Paul, an ambassador of his, a representative of his, and I’m using the term “legate,” a legate of Paul.

Timothy as far as I can tell—and I’ve never had anyone at least indicate to me anything otherwise—Timothy was not a pastor of a local church. You often hear people refer to Timothy as a young pastor or something like that. Titus the same way, although he was apparently a little bit older, a young pastor. Now there may be, it may be true that Timothy had the gift of a pastor, a pastor-teacher, it may be true that Titus had the gift of a pastor-teacher. But when we use the term “pastor,” we generally think because the church is largely gone this way in recent centuries, to have an individual who has administrative authority in the local church.

In fact, in the Baptist churches he has practically all the authority. I’ve told you as a pastor in the state of Alabama called me one time and asked about tapes on the local church, which many years ago we gave and which were available, and he had listened to some of them and was something of interest to him that this church was organized in a different way. He said, “You know in the Baptist church, the pastor is the authority in the church, and the work of the deacons is to try to persuade him otherwise.” [Laughter] And I didn’t argue with him because that was my impression, too, from speaking and preaching in many Baptist churches through the years that was the pastor who was largely the boss of the church unless all of the deacons managed to get together, in which case, by virtue of their church constitution, they might be able to remove him. But most of the time he was the boss, and they just tried to influence him. I think that’s the word that he used specifically to me.

Well, as far as I can tell the local church is to be operated by elders, a body of elders, and the authority rests in the plurality of those elders. There may be men who have the gift of pastor-teacher. There may be a man who has the gift or more, gift of an evangelist and the other spiritual gifts that

are referred to in passages like Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Peter 4 and Ephesians 4. I can always remember those. I know you’re surprised that I can remember that, but I just remember two 12’s and two 4’s and we have the major passages on spiritual gifts. It’s easy, isn’t it? At any rate, there are these gifted men and they serve, but they serve under the plurality of elders in the local church. Now, we all have many things in Believers Chapel, I’m sure that the apostles will look down and say, ah, there is the perfect fulfillment of all that we intended [laughter]. But at least, as far as the plurality of elders is concerned, this church has followed that particular biblical principle.

Timothy, then, I conceived to be an apostolic legate who was a person closely associated with Paul, indebted to him spiritually, and Paul used him to carry out the apostolic mind and apostolic position that the Lord had given to him. Two things bring confidence in spiritual things: one, the knowledge of the Word of God. That always brings confidence. And the second thing, just as important, is fidelity. That is, if a person has the spiritual knowledge that he should have from the knowledge of the Word of God and is faithful in the things of the Lord, that brings confidence.

Now, Tim—you don’t mind me calling him that, do you? Tim, that’s what you would call him. Tim had both of these things. Notice, “For this reason I’ve sent Timothy to you who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord who will remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach everywhere in every church.” This man had the knowledge of the apostle’s teaching, and he is called by the apostle “his faithful child,” a term that is used, translated “son,” in my version is the term *{teknon}* which normally means “child”—that is, a born one. So he is a beloved and faithful child in the Lord who will remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach everywhere.

Now, “his ways in Christ,” what does he mean by that? Well, I would suggest that by the context, it’s probably safest to say, he’s referring to his ethical or moral and doctrinal principles. So we’ll say his ethical and moral principals and his doctrinal principles, those are his ways in Christ. And Timothy is being sent in order to support the things that the Apostle Paul is setting forth in his letter, perhaps filling in details, the person who can answer questions about what Paul meant here or there. Now, Timothy was not with Paul. We don’t have him mentioned in the first chapters, I

remember. And therefore, he probably had been sent out in the light of something said in chapter 16 on another mission but ultimately would come to Corinth. And there he would, Paul said, “Faithfully instruct them in his ways in Christ, as he teaches everywhere in every church.”

The apostle makes it, I think, quite plain that there was a body of teaching that could be called apostolic doctrine. Turn over to chapter 7 in verse 17, Paul says, “But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches.” In chapter 11 in verse 16, he says with reference to the woman wearing hair and the men not wearing hats, he says at the end verse 16, “But if any one seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor the churches of God.” My text says, “Nor do the churches of God.”

Chapter 14 in verse 33, the apostle says, “For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.” So it seems that there is a body of knowledge that was generally communicated by the apostle, and his helpers and other apostles to the church as a whole scattered over that ancient world and that it was known and it was basically being followed. What we can believe, I think, is that we find this in the epistles and the teaching of the New Testament. I don’t mean simply the epistles, but the teaching of the New Testament.

So his teaching, Paul says, is consistent with his morals and doctrine, “Who will remind you of my ways in Christ just as I teach everywhere in every church.” So the apostle taught always, the things that he had believed and which were being communicated to the church as a whole. And his ways were in harmony with what he teaches. And everywhere he will remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach everywhere in every church. So there isn’t a body of knowledge he gives the Romans, well not that he had been to the Romans, but he gave to the Ephesians and another body of truth he gave to the Philippians and when he came to the Colossians because of their particular problems he had to modify his teaching there. No, he communicated this body of teaching faithfully because it had been given to him by the Lord. And he was responsible to be obedient to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Don Carson, I’ve referred to him several times because I’ve been reading a little, a very short book of his, really a collection of lectures. But in it, in this particular book, he has a section and on part of this that I’ve been studying, and I’m coming to the end of it, so I won’t be as good a preacher from now on really, except for one chapter I think he has later on because he has some excellent exposition. But he says with reference to this, that this is a vision of what Christian leadership must try to do, that we badly need to recapture. The need is evident even at a confessional seminary like the one at which I teach.

He teaches at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where I taught. And I was on the faculty with Don there and came to know and respect him highly for his knowledge of Holy Scripture. He said, “Increasingly, we have students who come from thoroughly Pagan or secular backgrounds who have been converted in their late teens or thirties. Not uncommonly they spring from dysfunctional families. And they carry a fair bit of baggage. More dramatically yet, a surprising number of them cannot easily make connection between the truths of the gospel and how we live.”

He says a couple of years ago a student who was about to graduate was called in by one of our faculty members who had learned that the student was planning to return to a computer science work which he had done previously, and he was going to abandon his plans to go into the ministry of the gospel. He said the student was a pleasant student with a solid B+ average to his credit, but as the faculty member indicated from conversing with him, it had become obvious that he student had not put everything together. He could define propitiation. Now that’s quite a step even for a theological student to do it accurately. He could define propitiation, but he didn’t know what it was like to feel forgiven. He could defend the priority of grace and salvation—ah now, that is something even more important in these days when Arminians lurk around every tree—priority of grace and salvation but still felt as if he could never be good enough to be a minister.

Does a minister have to be good in order to be a minister? If so, Paul would not be a minister, Peter would not be a minister, not anyone that I know of would be a minister. I certainly wouldn’t want to become a minister because of the life that I lived before I was converted. I might

be a candidate for jail but not for the ministry. He could define holiness, but found himself practicing firm self-discipline, rather than pursuing holiness. His life and his theological grasp had not come together. Mercifully he goes on to say this particular faculty member talked to the young man, went back and talked to him about the cross of Jesus Christ and the things that were signified by that great event. He said the young student began to weep, to use his expression, to weep and weep, as he glimpsed the love of God for him. And Don says that today he is in the ministry of the Word of God. It's very important to remember that the things that we study, the things that we see in the Bible, the things that we are taught are things that are to be lived out by us. As our friend Guy King said, “A belief that behaves is the kind of belief that is found in the New Testament.” Now, it's possible that Paul was attacked by the false apostles—in fact, it's probably likely—and that's the reason he speaks as he does here and asks for Timothy to come.

Now, in the final verses, verses 18 through 21, the apostle challenges the Corinthians and asks them to make a choice, do you want me to come as a strict disciplinarian or do you want me to come as a father, as a loving, kind, gentle father? In verse 18, “Now some are puffed up as though I were not coming to you.” Evidently, they thought since Paul's not coming, we're going to take over. And in Corinth, they were in effect, taking over. And so they were boasting. F. F. Bruce refers to the false apostles' boasting as “collapsing like an inflated balloon when it is pricked at the thought of what Paul writes in his epistle and also at the possibility of Paul's coming.”

Don Carson has called them empty religious windbags. And we have lots of them in the Christian church even today. They are empty religious windbags, and they stand in our pulpits and profess to be Christian. They often are not Christian and even some who may be called Christian are so far from following the teachings specifically of the Word of God that they are not credits to the gospel that they say they proclaim. So Paul speaks about them as puffed up, as though I were not coming. I am of Paul, I am of Cephas, I am of Apollos, I am of the Lord.

That raises a question again that we discussed just briefly back in chapter 1 in verse 17 where Paul says, “For Christ didn't send me to baptize but to preach the gospel. Not with wisdom of words

less the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.” Weren’t the Corinthians just doing that? They were just trying to preach the gospel with wisdom of words. They were trying to embellish the gospel in order that it might be more acceptable to those to whom it was being given.

And in fact John Calvin discusses that point a bit—should we therefore beware of eloquence in the pulpit? And this is what he says, “What if someone in our day speaks in rather brilliant fashion and makes the teaching of the gospel sparkle with his eloquence? Should he be rejected on that account as if he spoiled it or obscured the glory of Christ? I answer, first of all, that eloquence is not in conflict with the simplicity of the gospel at all when free from contempt of the gospel, it not only gives it first place in the subject to it, but also serves it as a handmaid serves her mistress.” In other words, the man who can be eloquent, if he will truly, earnestly, honestly use his eloquence to exalt the cross of Christ and the gospel, the person and work of Christ then the eloquence is useful.

He says, “For as Augustine says, ‘He who gave Peter the fisherman, also gave Cyprian the orator.’” And he means by that, so Calvin says, “That both men are from God, although the one who is much the superior in authority (that’s Peter) lacks any attractiveness of speech while the other who sits at his feet is famous for his outstanding eloquence. We must not condemn or reject the kind of eloquence which does not aim at captivating Christians with an outward brilliancy of words or at intoxicating them with empty delights or at tickling their ears with its jingle or at covering up the cross of Christ with its ostentation.”

That’s why I don’t try to exalt the Southern accent I have when I’m preaching to you. “No,” he says, “We must not condemn or reject it, because on the other hand, its aim is to call us back to the original simplicity of the gospel, to set on high the preaching of the cross and nothing else by humbling itself of its own accord. And finally to carry out as it were the duties of a herald, to obtain a hearing for those fisherman and uneducated common people who have nothing attractive about them except the power of the Spirit.” That, I think, is a marvelous statement because it is true if anyone knows anything about the history of the preaching of the gospel of Christ. There are those who are like Peter, and there are those who are like Cyprian, both of them are useful for the Christian

church if their messages and their manners are subjected to the truth of the gospel. Anyone who preaches the gospel plainly, clearly, and fully, in my opinion, will be eloquent, although his speech may reflect the background from which he comes.

In the 19th verse he says, “But I will come to you shortly if the Lord wills, and I will know not the word of those who are puffed up, (those bombastic fellows who are making distinctions between the men who have ministered the Word of God to them and disturbing the church by setting up factions within the church.) I’ll not know the word of those who are puffed up but the power, if the Lord wills.” Now, that I think is so down to earth, “If the Lord wills. After all, if there is a Los Angeles earthquake, or there is an Alabama tornado, or there is a JFK assassination, there is a Sarajevo, there are things that arise that no human being can anticipate. And so the apostle says, “I will come to you shortly if the Lord wills.”

Now, I think Calvin has some other good information here, too. As you can tell, I’ve been reading that ancient interpreter going through this particular book. He says, “Now, although we are not bound to constant—to be constantly using such expressions—all the same it is better to take care to become accustomed to them, so that again and again we may actively consider that all our plans must be subjected to the will of God. So we don’t have to keep saying if it’s the Lord will, if the Lord wills, if it should be the Lord’s will, well if the Lord allows me to do this. There is no need to put on like that, but that should be in our mind always with reference to the decisions that we make. And if every now and then, the expression tumbles out of your mouth, that’s all right. But it’s a good idea not to say it so much that people think that you are embellishing matters to indicate to others that you belong to those who are of Christ, that company, the spiritual ones.

Now, I think there is another thing the apostle does here that probably we should call attention to, and it’s this: that he’s trying to curb the ambition of the false apostles and the Corinthians in the church who are out of fellowship with the Lord by what he’s saying here. But at the same time, what he is doing is charging the Corinthians with a distorted judgment. They evidently were judging people by the way in which they express the truth.

I see a lot of that in Christian circles because I do travel around a bit and listen to what people say in various parts of the country about various preachers. And it really is astonishing how Christians constantly talk about the Reverend Dr. so-and-so or Pastor-so-and-so or whoever, indicating that it's not so much what they say theologically, but it's how they say it that has impressed them. I hear that often.

Now, I was in Portland over last weekend, and I was down here in Dallas down at the Legionnaire conference the weekend before that, and I was in Tallahassee, Florida, and so I've been around a little bit recently and it is very interesting what people are saying. They are judging preachers by what they say and how they say it, not by the doctrine that they proclaim. So my young student friend that TEDS¹ faculty had to minister to, who knew the priority of grace in the gospel, he knew some things that should be proclaimed, those are the things that really matter. But apparently the Corinthians were interested in the things that made impressions upon the people.

He says in verse 19, he's going to know not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power, the word, not the word of those who are puffed up but the power, that babbling in which the false apostles and the false teachers were taking such delight with their great flow of impressive words. Paul is not going to pay attention to that. He is going to know just how much of divine power is represented in what they are saying. The reality, the power of course, is the power that is provided by the ministry of the Holy Spirit accompanying the preaching that was being given.

Today we have great flow of words and lots of other things, too. We have the culture mongers who are in our church and worldliness has infected the evangelical church, and today the church meeting has become a show. You remember one time we got a—I got a call or at least it was a written thing—listening to our radio broadcast. I would think that nothing can be hardly less of a show than our radio broadcast. And some fellow wrote and said, “I caught your show the other morning.” [Laughter] That reflected the traditions of our day, the *show*, the Believers Chapel Bible hour, a show. No, we're talking about the culture mongers have come in the church and we talking

¹Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

about the music, the humor, and the word-byte, for that’s about what it is. It’s a word byte, b-y-t-e, like one of those bytes that we hear on the TV screen or see in our computer, that’s what is important today. The other things are more important, but the Word of God has become less and less a part of our churches. What a distorted judgment of divine things exists in the church today.

So Paul says in the final verse, “For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.” And by the way, in Paul, in almost every—I think every occasion, the kingdom of God is eschatological. You go back, get your concordance out, look it up, and I think you will see that the kingdom of God is eschatological. It’s a reference to the future. Now, once or twice Paul uses that term, but he’s thinking about it as future, but he’s talking about how it’s brought down into the present, but he means the future when he says that. And that’s not simply my view, that’s the view of others who’ve studied this expression. He says, “What do you want, shall I come to you with a rod or in love and the spirit of gentleness? Shall I come with the strictness of the shepherd’s crook?” Does he mean excommunication? Well, perhaps, but perhaps not. But it is to be a time of reproof and admonishment. And so he asks them, What do you wish? Do you want me to come with a rod to exercise discipline, or do you want me to come in love and the spirit of gentleness?

If you look at the 19th verse in connection with this, the apostle talking about the will of God. He talks about the will of God, and then verse 19 he talks about the will of man, and then the will of the Corinthians in verse 21 or the wish of the Corinthians there. We don’t have time to talk about the will of God and the will of man and the will of the Corinthians, but they are all right there. And I just want to close with a comment on that 21st verse, “What do you wish, shall I come to you with a rod (that is to discipline, to reprove, to admonish,) or do you wish that I come in love and a spirit of gentleness.” I’d like to suggest to you when he says come with a rod, he doesn’t mean an unloving rod, but a loving rod because discipline in love is the ideal discipline. But he does mention here in love and a spirit of gentleness.

When a person is sick, he looks for some relief. He usually thinks about his doctor or his wife. Wives act as doctors in many cases. The first thing that is prescribed for us is usually bitter.

There are very few medicines that are nice to take, that we look forward to taking. Even cough medicine is often bitter. Medicine when we are sick is bitter, but even though it's bitter, it is what we need when we are sick. And the same thing pertained to the Corinthians. They were sick. They were on a path that meant, amidst the factions, the loss of the testimony of the church and unfruitfulness in their ministry. They were not preaching the Word of God in the sense in which the apostle felt they should. And so he reminds them, you have to make a choice, and I'm going to come in one of these spirits. I'm going to come like a shepherd with a rod, or I'm going to come like a shepherd in love in the spirit of gentleness, and it is up to you to respond by the help of the Holy Spirit in the proper way.

That's a message for all of us, isn't it? Always. In all of the experiences that we have as Christians, we remember the Bible says that when we step out of the will of God, it's necessary for us to have some bitter medicine. And the bitter medicine is what we need, of course, but often we don't want to take it.

May the Lord help us to remember that we are flesh, and that we constantly fail, and we need to lean constantly upon the Lord. And when we have said something or done something contrary to the Word of God, go ahead and take the medicine of confession and repentance as necessary. And saying and doing the things that we need to do to make things right if it involves others. May the Lord help us to do that. Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for this marvelous passage from the apostle. We thank Thee for the love and the spirit of gentleness that moved him. And we also thank Thee for the spirit of reproof and admonition that he exhibited, for that we know, Lord, is part of the spirit of God. And we pray that we may be responsive to admonishment as well as to love and gentleness. Help us, Lord, to be fruitful. And, Lord, we pray for Believers Chapel, that it may be fruitful in the day in which Thou hast placed this wonderful testimony. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.