

Sermon 12: 1 Corinthians 3:16-4:5: How Thinking Biblically Stops Church Divisions

OUTLINE

By knowing we are God's holy temple
By not deceiving ourselves about the world's wisdom
By regarding the servants of Christ correctly

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with a quote: 'Fallen, sinful humanity tends to be afflicted with one of two great sicknesses. One is pride and the feeling of self-sufficiency, and the other is insecurity and the feeling of inferiority. Both groups seek to heal their problems by boasting, either in themselves or in others.'¹ This quote sums up well the wrong ways of thinking that were troubling the Corinthian church. The Corinthians had an inflated view of themselves and their gifting, an over-confidence in their assessments, a worldly way of viewing human teachers, and an addiction to the wisdom of this world. All of this added up to causing terrible divisions in the Corinthian church. In this next section 3:16-4:5 Paul is going to specifically focus upon their way of thinking to try and get them right. You will notice that in v16 he asks, 'Do you not know?' In v18 he states, 'Let no one deceive himself.' In 4:1 he writes, 'This is how one should regard us.' In every instance Paul is correcting wrong thinking. In this section Paul sets the Corinthians straight in their thinking in three key areas, By knowing we are God's holy temple; By not deceiving ourselves about the world's wisdom; By regarding the servants of Christ correctly, these will be our three points.

By knowing we are God's holy temple

V16, 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' this is one of 10 times Paul uses this form of accusatory question. Like a rhetorical question this is something they do know but have not been thinking properly about. The church is the temple of God. Now Paul has been talking about the church as God's field, and ministers as workers in it; he added a second metaphor talking about the church as God's building and ministers as builders, with Christ as the foundation and Paul as the project manager. Paul drives this idea of the church as a building to the next level as he reveals that we are in fact the temple of God. Think of this as the final nail in the coffin when it comes to the idea of making sure that we are building carefully when we serve in the church. We are not dealing with something merely expensive but sacred. The background to this idea that we are the temple is of course found in the OT when God promises a glorious temple in the future. Jesus is the greater temple of God, He even said when He cleansed the temple, tear this temple down and in three days He would rebuild it, identifying Himself as the greater temple of God. Jesus is David's greater son, like Solomon who would build the great temple of God where He would abide. Christ is the cornerstone, and each one of us is living stones in this the greatest building project in human history. God is not merely building a dead building, but a people from all nations into one family, one body, one temple.

1 Daniel L. Akin, ["In Christ We Have It All \(1 Corinthians 3:18-23\)."](#) in *Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2023), 73.

Paul adds a second striking reality to this truth, God's Spirit dwells within us. In the OT God's shekinah glory filled the temple of Solomon. God on the day of Pentecost sent the Holy Spirit to inhabit the new temple of God's NT people. The flame of fire above each was demonstrating this amazing truth that both individually and collectively we are a dwelling place for God by His Spirit. This truth is almost too much for us to conceive. At this thought we should be like Moses before the burning bush who hid his face, who removed his shoes. We are living in the truth of the new covenant where sinners have been reconciled to God, God has chosen this heart to be his dwelling place, this body to be His house, He has chosen us to be the place where He is honoured and praised, for us to be His representatives. It is an honour that is too much for us. The Corinthians may have had some sense of this as they looked at the grand temples of their major cities and saw that this divided bunch of not many powerful, not many noble people, were the very temple of God. Appearances would not betray what we are by the Spirit.

Already we can feel the pressure of this reality don't we? If God is in our midst where should our focus be? Can we be consumed with men, dare we advance ourselves in God's temple? If the Holy God who is a consuming fire is in our midst, how holy should we be? Paul leans into this pressure, v17, 'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.' Paul has spoken about those who build well using gold, silver and precious stones, and those who build badly using perishable materials. Here Paul talks about a third group of people, these are false teachers. They can be inside or even outside the church, and they do damage to the church. Paul tells us that God will not take this slight lightly, but will 'destroy' them. Technically the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church, but in keeping with building a building, there is poor workmanship and there is negative workmanship. God does not take the work of false teachers, the work of those who divide the church lightly but very seriously.

So here is the challenge how do you see the church? Is it sacred or like any other secular group; does it have a special place in your heart or does it take second place to other worldly groups? Do you tread with care and caution recognizing the value of the church to God? Do you take pride in your service in the church knowing the high calling it is and your work within it will last forever? Do you love to come together with the people of God knowing that God will meet with you there inhabiting the praises of His people, for where we gather in His name there He is? Do you fear to spread gossip, undermine its ministries, happily disintegrate its unity, run down its members to others, etc. How you think of the church will affect how you act towards it.

By not deceiving ourselves about the world's wisdom

V18, 'Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.' Next Paul returns to the matter of the wisdom of the world. The Corinthians have been taken in by the confident, smart talking, know it all wisdom of the world. This has led them to preferring certain types of teachers to the plain gospel of Christ. They have been vulnerable to allow men who promote themselves to come in among them and divide them. They have developed a culture of man following just like the world. Divisions are abounding, so Paul zeroes in on one of the big issues, who is truly wise, who has the truth? Paul begins with a warning, let no one deceive

himself, because this is what we are prone to do. We default to unbelieving thought; we default to believing men rather than God; we default to trusting in our own assessment of things rather than testing all things by the word of God; we default to thinking that we are infallible and that our tastes, our instincts, our judgements, our opinions are automatically correct because they are ours. We are brilliant at self-deception.

The main deception Paul points out is when we think we are clever because we are sophisticated and have degrees in the way the world thinks. The wisdom of the world is in counterpoint to the wisdom of God. The world says you are strong, you can do it, you can do anything if you put your mind to it, you have all the potential, your will can shape reality, believe in yourself, and on and on it goes. But the wisdom of God says, you are weak and He is strong; you must be dependent not independent; you are sinful and He is holy, the way up is down by first humbling yourself and pleading your poverty not your riches; we cannot save ourselves we need another to do it; our greatest needs are not what we think they are but a right relationship with God. The things that God says are true and important the world says is folly, and what the world thinks is its wisdom God says is folly. If Christ is folly, a Saviour dying on the cross to pay my sin debt is folly, putting my trust in what He has done not what I can do is folly, then like Paul says let us become fools that we may become wise. The wisdom of the age was not Christ centered but man centered; it would have been full of the insights of Stoicism and Epicureanism, and it would have been full of the trending and fashionable ideas of the world's elites but it would not be able to save a sinner, only Christ can.

V19-20, 'For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.'" Today we often hear the phrase, 'Being on the wrong side of history.' This is used by those in the culture wars to shame people into thinking that 50 years from now they are going to be the slaveholders of yesteryear by the views and practices they have today. Christians and Christianity has regularly been accused of being on the wrong side of history. With its insistence on the bible's sexual ethics; its emphasis on marriage; its view of only two sexes; the immorality of abortion; traditional roles for men and women; its teaching on sin being judged with Hell; its teaching that Jesus Christ is the only Savior by which we can be saved. The world calls all this folly, and accuses us of being on the wrong side of history. Paul tells us here that the wisdom of this world is folly to God and is on the wrong side of history. This is not Paul hating on education encouraging an anti-intellectual mindset, he is talking about whole worldviews that people lean on for truth, morality, beauty and salvation. Evolutionary worldviews that deny God as Creator are sand; subjective individualist views that believe we can create our own morality, sexuality, and truth are lies; any system of truth that claims to be wisdom which does not start with God, that does not accept that we are made in His image to do His will, that we are fallen in sin and worthy of judgement, but that God in His grace has sent a Saviour to save us and bring us back to what we were made for is folly. Paul pulls in 2 OT prooftexts from Job 5:13 and Ps. 94:11 to show the danger and futility of this world's wisdom. God is not indifferent to your denial of truth, Job paints the picture of God as a hunter catching you in the trap of your own lies, allowing your own deceptions to be the cage of your own making that traps you and kills you. The thoughts of the so called wise do not eventuate in paradise or salvation or happiness or whatever it is they are aiming at but are futile, powerless, unable to deliver.

Paul's point is a simple one, why do you become enamoured with smart sounding nonsense and let it into the church to rip it apart when you have the gospel? Why do you allow yourself to believe men who seem cleverer than you and follow them to your own hurt and the harm of the church? V21-23, 'So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.' Paul brings in a very important point. We do not need these men and their teachings because we have everything in Christ already. What can this world's wisdom promise us that we do not already have in Christ and more? Paul turns it around on the Corinthians and asks them to compare what they have in Christ with the folly of this world's wisdom which is on the wrong side of history, is a trap God is using to catch the proud, and is finally futile?

Paul makes a list of all the Corinthians have in Christ. Firstly, he summarizing it as everything, all things are yours. The whole universe and everything in it. We know that this is only possible because all things are Christ's and we are co-heirs with Him, as His bride we have a share, as it were, in His estate. But Paul begins small and goes big. Paul is theirs. Yes the Corinthians have the benefit of Paul as their teacher because as an apostle and having received revelation from God he has preached it and declared the mysteries of God to the church. On top of that Apollos is theirs, the prince of preachers at the time, was a servant of the church in Corinth having ministered there for a while. Cephas is theirs, yes even the apostle to the Gentile belongs not only to the whole Church but the Corinthian church as well. So as far as human teachers are concerned, do you want Paul, Apollos and Peter, or the upstarts who were promoting themselves and their message at the expense of the church in Corinth? Paul then launches into the ludicrous. The world is ours. Even though fallen, it is subjected to futility but will be made new in the creation and participate in the resurrection of the children of God. Life is ours, life here and now but also eternal life through Christ. Death, the great enemy that everyone fears is not our enemy it is ours. Death will be a door way that we pass through to the intermediate state where we will see Jesus as He is and enjoy our rest until the resurrection. Likewise the present, though filled with many enemies is ours because Christ is risen from the dead and is victorious. All things are working together for good, right now. The future is ours because we have the Spirit as a guarantee of the resurrection which is ours, the inheritance which is ours, the positive verdict on judgement day which is already ours. But better than that, we are Christ's. our greatest treasure is not in what we own but in who owns us, Christ is our Bridegroom, our Lord, our Saviour, the Lord is our portion. And to bring it all together, Christ is God's. in Christ we are restored to the God of all things and have Him as our portion. So compare this to what, some false teaching with some false promises, with some pretended wisdom and some fashionable ways of speaking. That is nothing to what we have in God and the gospel.

By regarding the servants of Christ correctly

4:1, 'This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.' In ancient culture, the role of teacher was very inflated compared to how ministers should be viewed in the church. Paul again returns to what a biblical view of what a minister is to save us from the pit falls that led the Corinthian church into its divisions. Firstly, ministers are 'servants of Christ.' The word for servant here is literally 'under-rower'. It is a word that comes from

describing the slaves that were used to row in the great Roman galleys. The word changed over time and came to be used of anyone under authority. Here is a word picture for us. The teacher in Christ's church is not the captain of the ship, that is Christ, he is merely an under-rower. He does not give orders, he takes orders. He does not set the course, he is just faithful in doing his part. In the world we would name schools of thought after men like Aristotelianism, or Platonic thought. In the church, Christ is our message not ourselves. Secondly, Paul calls the ministers 'stewards of the mysteries of God.' In a Roman household there would be a head servant who would be in charge of the other servants, something similar to a head butler. The ministers charge is not only over the household but also has to steward the mysteries of God. The word mysteries means something that was only hinted at and hidden during OT times is now fully revealed. This is merely another way of talking about the gospel, the good news that the one promised in the OT has come in Jesus Christ. It is not talking about something people can't understand but something that has come to light. But please notice how Paul insists in faithfulness with the message. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for any who believe. Our primary role is one of announcing the message. Salvation comes when people hear the truth that they are sinners and Christ is their only hope of salvation. That any can be saved by faith if they will come to him in humility and faith. To deny God's holiness; our sinfulness; Christ's necessity; that it is only by faith not works, or any other part of this good news is to fail in our charge in stewarding the mysteries of God. This is what Paul says in v2, 'Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.'

It is at this point that Paul segues into an adjoining problem in the Corinthians situation, the problem of human wisdom trusting itself so much that it sits in criticism and judgement of God's servants in the church. We know all about this don't we? We are quick to show off by broadcasting our discontent as if complaining were a measurement of one's intellect. As young people we think that it is adult to complain about everything. It seems that we pretend to being people of good taste and discernment by how much we criticize and complain. We assert our superiority over people by being impossible to please, by constantly finding fault; we allow no one to be praised in our presence but we must cut down the tall poppy, often saying more about our sense of inferiority than anything else. How many times has the preacher been the main course for a Sunday lunch as he has been drawn and quartered. Instead of taking the words that he has spoken and the Christ he has proclaimed we have fixated on those human aspects that film and food critics fixate on. Simon Cowell and Gordon Ramsay have turned nasty criticism and being difficult to please a mark of sophistication. One look at Twitter and how Christians talk about each other is very revealing. The Corinthians were cultured despisers of all sorts of things and the preachers of God's word were fair game in their critical one-upmanship. This resulted in them sitting above the word of God instead of under it, of exalting those who did not preach Christ because they satisfied their worldly criteria. This led to competition; division; judgmentalism, and Paul addresses it here.

V3-5, 'But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.' The Christian minister can fall prey to seeking man's approval, here

Paul reminds the Corinthians, as he uses himself as an example, that God is the one who finally judges and it is God's commendation that we live for. The Corinthians have had some very poor things to say of Paul, Paul tells them here that it is water off a duck's back. He does not care. Paul is exemplifying the thick skin we need to have at times. He accomplishes this not by detaching his emotions, or thinking less of his critics with some levelling remarks but by remembering that as a Christian the only one whose judgement matters is God's and He has ruled in our favor. When we remember this we can be set free from being enslaved by man's approval. Paul talks about three levels of human judgement. Church members criticizing their minister; being judged in a human court; and being judged by our own consciences. Ultimately when compared with God's judgement they are all human and faulty.

Paul tells us here not to judge before the time; how does this square with what Paul says in the very next chapter v12, 'For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?' We often have this idea of 'don't judge' thrown in our face anytime we talk about sin or discernment. What do we make of Paul's statements about judging?

Based on the bible's other statements about judging we recognize that there is a proper place biblical judging. Paul has just said that God alone is qualified to judge, that He alone can know the heart, does this mean that we can never judge? The answer must be there is a place for a qualified form of judging. We may not be able to read the heart but if a person reveals their motives; or if they betray their motives by an obvious outward evidence, for example open impenitent sin, then that is the time that we will be able to make judgements. Otherwise law courts could not function either. We want to avoid the suspicious, critical, ungenerous spirit that happily attributes the worst possible motives to others; we want to avoid that easy judgmentalism that has no regard for what God says but is just an airing of our own opinions to make ourselves seem important. Ken Sande of Peacemaking Ministries talks about charitable judgements. 'Sande notes there are at least four limits on making charitable judgments:

First, God's command to be charitable does not require us to believe that an action is good when there is significant evidence to the contrary. Although we should always give people the benefit of the doubt, we should not ignore clear indications that things are not as they should be. In fact, excessive charity can lead to denial and blind us to issues that need to be faced.

Second, charity does not require that we accept without question everything people tell us. Nor does it require that we naively entrust ourselves to people who do not have legitimate authority or have not proven themselves to be worthy of our trust. Since we live in a fallen world, charity must always walk hand in hand with discernment and wisdom (Phil. 1:9-10; James 3:14-17).

Third, the call for charitable judgments should not be used to stifle appropriate discussion, questioning, and debate. If people have sincere concerns about a matter, they should not be brushed aside with, "Just trust us."

Finally, charity does not prevent the exercise of redemptive church discipline. When the leaders of a church believe a member is caught in a sin, they have a responsibility to seek after him, like shepherds looking for a straying sheep (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1).'²

2 Daniel L. Akin, ["Four Truths a Minister of God Must Never Forget \(1 Corinthians 4:1-5\)."](#) in *Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2023), 79-80.

We had better bring this message to a close. Paul wants to set our thinking straight. He wants us to think well about the church remembering that it is the holy temple of God; he wants us to think well about the wisdom of this world, that it has nothing to offer us and we have all we need in Christ; and he wants us to think properly about the servants of Christ avoiding wrong ways of judging them remembering that God is the final judge.