

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART FIVE

Following his optimistic beginning in 1:1-9 where he is excited about what God can do, Paul has dealt with a series of reasons why Christian churches become divided. First we follow men, even good men. Second we argue over whether leaders should show wisdom or signs.(chapter 1) Thirdly we divide over which kind of human wisdom or doctrine we should have.(chapter 2) Fourthly we fight like children because we have remained spiritual babies.(chapter 3) Each time Paul demonstrates how the grace of God we already have can change these situations. Now in chapter 4, he looks at a further cause of division, how we criticise the behaviour of our leaders.

Leaders are servants of Christ not the church and are therefore answerable only to Christ.(4:1-5) Dealing with the failings of His servants is God's business not ours.(Matt.7:1-5; Rom.2:1; James 4:11,12) The Corinthians were writing Paul and Apollos off as failures because they compared their leaders with themselves in material terms. As a big commercial centre they measured success in terms of money. They had carried this thinking over into the Christian church and assumed that affluence meant God's approval and blessing, and therefore poverty equalled His disapproval, presumably because of sin or a lack of faith. Paul, teasing them to some extent, compares their wisdom, which they supposed was the cause of their wealth, with his foolishness which must be the cause of his poverty. He reminds them that everything worthwhile they have was God-given not earned.(4:6-8)

Paul's description of his conditions is rather hard for us to accept if we come from a comfortable, middle-class church. What had happened to God's promise to supply every need of Paul's?(Phil.4:19) As a missionary what was he doing working with his own hands? Very simply he explains that his poverty allows him to identify with others who share such conditions and work with their hands, and that God's promises are of spiritual provision not necessarily material. Tough times are an opportunity not a threat, and he is delighted to make the most of them.(4:9-11)

Having dealt with their attitude towards him in which they have criticised him for his poverty, Paul now reverses the situation to talk about his attitude towards them. He pictures himself as a father with children, not a school teacher with pupils. The teachers of those days were expected to be harsh and negative, only pointing out the failures of their pupils, not encouraging them when something went well. Many teachers were educated slaves put in charge of the master's children, anxious to keep their position by showing how smart they were. Plenty of people are prepared to be tutors to us; very few want to be parents.(4:14-16)

Writing letters has some effect but visiting in person is usually more powerful. Paul plans first to send Timothy and then to come himself. Timothy is one to whom he has been very much a father in Christ. There are times when fathers must act strongly to get their message across to their children. It should be a last resort not a first. As Christians there are times when we have to accept the very painful responsibility of straight talking.(4:17-21)

Chapter 5 was a time for straight talking.

5:1 Q.1 What was the behaviour which required blunt words from Paul? What did the Old Testament say about such a situation?(Lev.18:8) Why is it wrong? How had Paul come to know about this? Was it gossip?

5:2 Q.2 How do we know that this was not just someone being suspicious of the behaviour of others? How had the church reacted to the problem? Give examples of how such reactions happen in the church today.

5:3-5 Q.3 How does Paul want them to deal with the problem? Isn't he contradicting what he said in the previous chapter about judging one another? What does he mean by 'delivering such a one to Satan'?(I Tim.1:20) Does it mean that we and God give up on a sinner?

5:6-8 Q.4 What illustration does Paul use to explain the effect upon the church of such a situation that has not been dealt with? How does the picture he uses here help to explain the significance of sacrifices without leaven in the Old Testament,(Lev.2:11) and the parable of Jesus in Matt.13:33?

5:9-11 Q.5 What instruction does Paul give here about with whom we should associate? What important distinction should we draw in approaching this problem? Why should we associate with one group and not the other? What will be the effect of getting it wrong?

5:12,13 Q.6 Whom then are we to judge? And on what basis? Again this passage seems to contradict teaching elsewhere on judgement? How can we show that it is consistent?(I Cor.14:29)