

Spiritual Fatherhood

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

Father-hunger is one of the deepest pains in our world. We rejected God the Father, and so Jesus Christ had to come and die as a faithful Son in our place to reconcile us to Him. This reconciliation leads to the restoration of fatherhood on earth, both biological and spiritual. Paul laments the lack of spiritual fathers in Corinth, and the Corinthians' refusal to follow his fatherly care.

True Authority

He writes not to shame but to warn them because he loves them (v14). The Corinthians should be ashamed of boasting and attacking, but this is not his goal. Paul anticipates their objections--"You're only saying this to make me feel bad"—because he wants them to know his love (and ultimately God's love) through true spiritual authority. They might have 10,000 guardians, but they have few fathers who will sacrificially care for them (v15). A guardian or pedagogue was like a nanny hired to care for the children in a household. You hire a babysitter, coach, tutor or dentist to do a job for your kids, but you don't expect them to make personal sacrifices. Fathers are willing to suffer. Faith is the gift of God who gives the increase (3:6), but we still have human spiritual fathers. Paul begat them through the gospel (v15). Interestingly, neither Paul, the other apostles, or the early church fathers took the title "Father" (cf. Matt. 23:9). Referring to clergy as "Father" spread in the Middle Ages when priests served as confessors. We make two fundamental errors commonly made regarding human authority. We either absolutize it or dismiss it altogether. Authoritarian parents, cults, statists, and churches absolutize, and individualistic people dismiss. All human authority is limited and fallible, but still true authority when God establishes it. Even partially corrupt rulers have legitimate authority; they "sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do" (Matt. 23:2-3). True authority is inescapable. We should run from the abuse of authority not into non-authority, but into fatherly love given by our Father.

Imitation

Paul's appeals to authority: "Listen to me because I'm your father. I love you *because* I'm your father." This is the *because I say so* argument, and it's justified by sacrificial behavior: "Therefore I urge you, imitate me" (v16). If authority is to bless others, it has to be obedient. Jesus says that he who would be the greatest must become the servant of all (Matt. 23:11). This is the opposite of "Do as I say, not as I do." Paul is a servant to the Corinthians, so he can and must tell them to imitate him. He calls himself the chief of sinners, so this is not a claim to perfection. But he is an example of humble, repentant faithfulness that if imitated will heal their divisions. We tend to look down on imitation, but it's the biblical way to learn godliness (cf. Heb. 13:7). Paul trained Timothy, his faithful son in the Lord, and took the trouble to send him in order to teach and model his ways (v17). Sometimes more is caught than taught as

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we follow the actions of others, but in the church we want both teaching and imitation. This is doctrine and fellowship, word and sacrament, truth and love, knowledge and community.

Power

Spiritual fathers are willing to confront problems. Arrogant people in Corinth yammered and divided because they didn't think Paul would show up (v18). He plans to come soon, God-wiling, and he will see if they have any cattle to go with their hats (v19). There was lots of talk about who was better, wiser, stronger among the Corinthian because proud people love to talk about superiority rather than demonstrating it. People love to talk about what's wrong with the church, the family, the company, the neighborhood instead of doing something about it. A godly leader can't love to brawl (1 Tim. 3:3), but neither can he be unwilling to confront sin that hurts the body. Paul will find out if these people have anything behind what they're saying. The kingdom is not about idle talk, but power—godly action (v20). Paul lost two debates: one with Stephen and one with Jesus. He didn't want to bring the rod of discipline to Corinth, but he would if he had to. The choice was up to them (v21). This is good news, that spiritual fathers will do what it takes to love us, to bring us back the Lord.