

Be Imitators of Me

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

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¹⁴ I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶ I urge you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. ¹⁸ Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. ²¹ What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

I remember the birth of our first child like it was yesterday. She was tiny, beautiful, and amazingly she looked just like me. Before I knew it, the day came to take her home, which was the scariest thing I've ever done in my life. Over time I've realized that not only do our children often look just like us, but the more they grow, the more they act just like us.

When I was a kid I remember very distinctly mimicking my own father. I followed him around the yard with my toy mower, and today my son does the same when I mow the yard. When I do pre-marital counseling, I encourage couples to talk in detail about their own parents (what roles they played in the home; how they spent their time and money; how they disciplined children; etc.), because, like it or not, we become like our parents. The number one place boys learn to be husbands and fathers is from their own father.

So, it is the scariest thing in the world to know that you will beget children that not only look like you, but act like you as well. And this reality forces the question upon us, "Are we living in such a way that we want our children to grow up to be like us, to act like us, to value what we value, to speak like we speak? As a father, I live with the constant awareness that everything I do and say has a profound and penetrating affect on my children. And, what is true within our own families is also true in the church.

In these verses, Paul uses family imagery and he applies it to the church. He considers himself to be the father of the Corinthian church (v. 15). He beget them through the gospel. Most of them became Christians through his ministry. Paul started the church. He's their spiritual father, they are his children.

In v. 16 Paul says, "I urge you, then, be imitators of me." Just like a boy imitates his daddy, Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate him. The Corinthian church is full of division, strife, and jealousy. They are living primarily by their own human preferences. They are fighting to get their own way and neglecting God's Word. They are living like kings, reigning and ruling with the world's wisdom, and their church is in a real mess. Paul's final appeal to them for a change of heart, mind, and action is simply this, "Imitate me." He's essentially saying to them, "Live like me. Think like me. Act like me. Speak

like me. Follow Jesus like me. I'm your spiritual father in Christ, let me show you how to really build Christ's church."

The implications of what Paul tells the Corinthians are incredibly significant for us today. This morning we will note four things. First, the church is a family. Second, the church is a family created by the gospel. Third, as a family the church needs spiritual fathers to imitate. Fourth, as a family the church needs discipline.

The Church Is a Family

Paul thinks of the church as his family, and we likewise ought to think of the church as our family. There are various images given of the church in Scripture (temple of God, body of Christ, bride of Christ), but one of the most predominant images is that of family. Commonly, the church is called a "household" (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17). Appropriately, then, the New Testament authors called other Christians "brothers" and "sisters." Paul refers to himself both as a father (1 Cor. 4:15) and as a nursing mother (1 Th. 2:7).

As a family, the church is an "organic" institution. That is, it is a living, breathing, organic entity. The Bible does not refer to the church with "mechanical" imagery. Paul does not say that the church is a "well-oiled machine." The reality is that we can't say that. We are not a well-oiled machine. In fact, we ought not to think that way. We are instead a family, a living, breathing, organic entity.

Sometimes Christians don't want a family. After all, families can be difficult and messy. Instead they would prefer a type of well-oiled machine that spits out "processed" Christians. Our language sometimes reflects this. Let's develop programs – get people plugged in – recharge their batteries. The imagery is clean, efficient, and industrious. If we were robots, it would be wonderful. But we are not robots.

Jesus himself thought of God's people as a family with stronger ties than even biological families share. Early in his ministry Jesus was told one day that his mother and brothers were looking for him. We read Jesus' response in Mark 3:33-34, "'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'"

If you want a church that is a well-oiled machine, that runs according to exacting specifications and spits out generic, processed Christians, you aren't going to find that here. If, however, you want a family, brothers and sisters in the Lord who care for you, and whom you care for, that is what we are striving to be.

Yes, family life is sometimes messy. It is hard. Brothers and sisters fight. But at the end of the day, if we are thinking rightly about the church, our family bonds in Christ bind us together in a strong, organic union that is much more significant than any "mechanical" imagery of the church ever will.

My happiest moments at our church come when we are just being a family. Just this week I sat in on a deacon meeting as they discussed how best to offer financial assistance to church members that were in need. Yesterday a number of us helped a new family move into their home. This week I sat down with two of our children, examined them in their catechism knowledge, and I rejoiced that they are learning well what it means to be a part of this family as they learn the biblical truths that define who we are. Regularly I hear stories about our members helping other members in some pretty

amazing ways. Most significantly, as a family we gather together for worship and commune on Sundays. This is our family meal, feasting on God's Word and on the broken body and shed blood of Christ.

The Church Is a Family Created by the Gospel

So, the church is a family, but we are also a family with a very specific origin. The church has come into existence through the gospel. Paul says, "I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (v. 15). God used Paul to birth this church *through the gospel*. The Corinthian church had a distinctly supernatural origin. Although Paul planted, Apollos watered, God himself is the one who formed the church and gave the growth through the gospel.

Friends, our own church has supernatural origins. This church is God's work, not man's. God himself has formed us into a family through the supernatural means of the gospel.

Consider the implications. We are not a family because we are all Pittsburgh Steelers fans. I'm not. I'm from Cincinnati, I pull for the Bengals, and yet you still warmly receive me as your pastor. Why? Because you understand that it is the gospel that unites us, not some sports team. We are not a family because we are all white, middle-class Americans. We're not all white. We're not all middle-class. We're not even all U. S. citizens. We are not a family because we share the same political views. We don't. We are not a family because we share the same hobbies, recreations, or other interests. In reality, there is only one thing that has formed us and bound us together as Christ's church, and that is his gospel.

Any attempt to build church unity around anything other than the gospel will ultimately fail. Paul knew this. When the Corinthians were dividing over which church leader to follow, what does he do? He preaches the gospel to them. He reminds them over and over again in these early chapters of 1 Corinthians of the gospel, that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, that they were baptized into Christ Jesus. He tells them, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2).

Now, here in v. 15, he plainly tells them that the gospel is the source of their existence as a church. The gospel, therefore, is the grounds of their unity. Later Paul will tell us that the church is a body with many parts. We have a broad diversity of gifts and passions. Some are hands, some are ears, some are eyes, but we make up a single body. We exist as a church because God supernaturally formed us into a family through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is that gospel alone that unites us together.

Spiritual Fathers Worthy of Imitation

In v. 16 Paul emphatically says, "I urge you, then, be imitators of me." He tells them, "I'm your father. Watch me, act like me, think like me, talk like me, live like me, be like me." Here, those of us who are leaders within the church (elders, deacons, teachers, seminarians, etc.) must pay special heed to what Paul is saying. More than anyone else in our church family our church leaders need to be able to say, "Watch me. Live like me. Imitate me."

The apostle Paul does this over and over again, and he teaches others to do the same:

- Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).
- Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us (Phil. 3:17).
- What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me--practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:9).
- You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings (2 Tim. 3:10-11).
- Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity (1 Tim. 4:12).
- Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works (Tit. 2:7).

We see in 1 Cor. 4:17 that when Paul could not be among the Corinthians, he sent Timothy. Paul writes, "I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ." For Paul, Timothy was a living, breathing example of his own way of life in Christ.

Our default tendency is to want to say, "Well, I'm not the best example," or "I'm growing right along with everyone else." We think we are being humble, but when we say this our message is clear. Don't follow my example. Don't imitate me.

This week Paul's words have really been working on my heart. Can I say in good conscience, "Imitate me"? I know that if I stand in the pulpit and weekly preach angry sermons, I'm going to produce angry Christians. If I go doctrinally astray, I will lead people doctrinally astray. If I am not zealous for the honor of God's name to be spread among the nations, you will not be either. I've not arrived yet, but I am striving to be able to say to you in good conscience, "My dear church family, imitate me. Follow me as I follow Jesus. Pray like me. Study God's Word like me. Love God and neighbor like me. Love the church like me. Watch me. Fathers, let me show you how to kneel with your children in prayer, how to teach them the Bible, how to love your wives. Let me show you how to live and die in Christ." This is what all leaders within Christ's church should be striving for. Truly, I am not the best example in each of those areas, but if I were not able to say, "imitate me" at all, then I ought not be a leader in the church.

Friends, Christ's church is in desperate need of "fathers" who are worthy of imitation. Will you be one of them? Are you striving to grow in ways worthy of imitation?

Every Family Needs Discipline

Finally, as a family we need discipline. Paul writes in vv. 18-21:

¹⁸ Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.

²¹ What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

As their father, Paul is seriously concerned for his children. He raises two issues. First in vv. 19-20, are they merely all talk and no power? Apparently the Corinthians were talking a good game. They thought they had it all figured out. They were wiser than wise in their own eyes. They thought they knew everything there was to know about being a Christian and building up Christ's church. But Paul knows they are not acting like Christians. They are not building up the church. In fact, as long as they live by the world's ways and wisdom, the power of God is not among them.

Second, Paul raises the issue of the potential need for discipline. He asks, "Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" (v. 21). Nobody, of course, wants the rod. But the reality is that all of us sometimes need the rod. The potential for any Christian to go astray is perhaps greater than we think, and our need for corrective discipline to return us to a faithful walk with Christ is essential. Today, many churches neglect the rod. Many churches do not faithfully practice church discipline. But what kind of father does not discipline his children? Indeed at times we can be like the Corinthians – all talk and no show, not living under the power of the gospel – and we need someone like Paul to step in with the rod.

Union With Christ

None of what has been discussed above is possible without a living, vital, growing union with Christ. Four times in three verses Paul speaks of this union with Christ:

For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶ I urge you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church (4:15-17).

For Paul, it is not merely his ways that we are to imitate, but his ways *in Christ*. The message is simple. No church can truly be a growing, healthy family of God without Jesus. No Christian can truly be an example for others, worthy to be imitated, without this vital union with Christ.

If we have any hope to be thriving Christians within a thriving church family, we must be in Christ, resting in him alone through the power of the gospel.