

***PRIDE OR PEACE?***

**1 Corinthians 4:6-21**

**October 30, 2005 (AM) – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

Pride is defined in a number of ways. For some, pride is nothing more than satisfaction in some accomplishment or achievement. Others would define pride according to the worth or dignity of a person, as self-respect. Still others might define pride as pleasure or satisfaction in a person, group, place or object. Defined in these ways, *pride* may not seem to be very dangerous to us. But in these shallow definitions lie the incipient destructive core of what pride really is – self-centeredness and self-sufficiency. When examined from a biblical perspective, we see that pride is nothing more than a feeble and yet exhilarating attempt to rob God of the glory that rightly belongs to Him alone, what some of the biblical writers called vain-glory. In relation to Christ and His Church, *pride* is nothing more than a person(s) exalting one self or others while at the same time dethroning Christ. John Calvin wrote, “All who exalt themselves wage war with God” [as quoted by John Blanchard, *Sifted Silver*, 249], and John Piper, “Pride is a turning away from God specifically to take satisfaction in self.”

[<http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/88/121888.html>]

Pride has always been an issue in Christianity and the Church. Martin Luther fought steadfastly against the abuses in the Church that had gained a foothold in his day. On the now infamous day October 31, 1517, Luther, Lecturer of Sacred Theology at the University of Wittenberg, is said to have nailed his now famous Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This was the normal way of posting announcements for university events; church doors functioned much like bulletin boards in public places today. On that day, Luther was doing nothing more than announcing a discussion or debate that he would preside over concerning the content of the document. All were invited and those that could not attend were even encouraged to participate by letter. The document summarized Luther’s disagreement with the Church and challenged its teachings on the nature of penance or forgiveness, the authority of the pope, and the use of indulgences. In particular, Luther was concerned about the leadership of the Church, particularly as vested in the pope as being the final authority concerning doctrinal issues, and the resulting heresies that had come to the fore based on the traditions of the Church. The consequence for the Church was that many had come to a false assurance of faith and salvation based upon the false doctrine of indulgences. They had been taught that their sins were forgiven based upon their good works of mercy or, in the most abusive cases, by contributing financially to the work of rebuilding St. Peters and the payment of back taxes by Albert, bishop of Mainz. Luther’s concern is summarized in #92 of the Ninety-five Theses:

92. Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, “Peace, peace,” and there is no peace!

It was this false assurance attached to the abuse of indulgences that led Luther to write and distribute the Ninety-five Theses. For Luther, and those who followed, the gospel was at stake. These false teachers, with the abominable pope as their head, were holding the Church hostage by their wicked pride. For Luther, the issue was simple: Are you going to follow prideful man and his traditions, or Christ and the Word of God. Hence, the rally cry of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*, and the birth of the Protestant Church, those who protested against the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church.

The same thing was at stake 1500 years earlier in Corinth. *Pride* had subtly crept into the life of the congregation because of the foolishness of some. In our text this morning we see Paul point blank exposes this pride. All that Paul had written in the first part of this letter was leading up to the real issue in the church at Corinth, the sinfulness and destructiveness of pride, pride in self and pride in wisdom, particularly among the assumed leadership in the body. What we glean from Paul's teaching in this text is that *pride and peace cannot coexist in the body of Christ*. Paul does this by showing (1) the devastating effects of pride in the human heart and then he offers (2) an appeal for reconciliation or peace.

## I. The Effects of Pride (vv. 6-13)

In our text this morning we see the devastating effects of pride, both in the heart of an individual and as it effects the entire body. Each of these builds one upon the other.

### 1. Distort the Scriptures (v. 6)

Paul's reason for writing these things and applying them to Apollos and himself was so that as the Corinthians saw these truths fleshed out in the lives and characters of these men, particularly as it related to being servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, they would not "**exceed what is written**" and "**become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.**" Paul's illustrations went right to the heart of the pride and arrogance of these assumed leaders at Corinth. Paul had carefully built his argument by showing that these leaders had no Scriptural warrant for putting Paul, Apollos or any other man on a pedestal. Christ and Christ alone is to be exalted. Christ and Christ alone is to be the only foundation upon which His Church was to be built and thrive. Those who God had chosen to lead in this endeavor were to be humble instruments in His hands who were constantly focused on preaching and living Christ.

The leaders of these factions at Corinth had missed this. They had, by their assumed loyalties, become "**arrogant in behalf of one against the other.**" They had gone "**beyond what is written**" and had been handed down in the pages of the Old Testament. Simply put, they should have known better. But here we see an effect of pride. Paul suspects that these leaders were knowingly elevating Paul, Apollos and others for their own gain. As John MacArthur points out, "As is often the case, the leaders were exalted for the followers' own sakes, not for the leaders' sakes" [*Ephesians*, 107]. Paul and Apollos were not benefiting from this glorification at all, but the leaders of these sects were "getting fat" so to speak. And they did so by taking great liberty with the Scripture, by "**exceeding what is written.**"

This is exactly what was happening in the Church in Luther's day. The Roman Curia had unashamedly exceeded what was written. This is one of the effects of pride. Once pride has its tentacles wrapped around the human heart, the heart will follow its own desires and its own passions at the expense of and in spite of God's Word. Is this not what happened in the Garden? The serpent approached Eve and tempted her with being like God. Eve's pride kicked in, and she denied the truth of God's Word. But of greater interest here is the serpent. If you remember, it was the pride of Satan that got him removed from heaven. And now, he comes to Eve, tempting her with the same pride that had caused him to fall. And how did he do it? He distorted or "exceeded" God's Word. He took what God said and twisted it. And Eve, in her pride, accepted this twisted, distorted truth and ate of the fruit so that she might be like God. It seems so tragic and senseless to us that Eve, given her surroundings, would be so foolish. But aren't we just like Eve? Do we not, like Eve, let pride rear its ugly head and take us down the slippery slope of vainglory? Do we not at times, like Eve, believe what we want about the plain

teaching of Scripture, making it say what we want it to say so that we too might live according to our pride?

In verse 7, Paul asked three rhetorical questions that strike at the heart of pride. **“For who regards you as superior?”** In light of the Cross, there is no superiority! Those who have been redeemed and pardoned through Christ are all alike in Christ. The Cross is the great leveler—all are alike in Christ Jesus. D.A. Carson put it this way, “One-upmanship among those redeemed by a crucified Messiah is repulsive” [Carson, *The Cross and Christian Leadership*, 102]. Paul continued, **“What do you have that you did not receive?”** Paul’s question here strikes at the ingratitude that accompanies pride. What did you have to do with your existence? Does not every breath you take come from your Creator just as everyone else’s does? Everything you have comes from God. He went on, **“And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”** You have nothing of yourself of which you can boast. Here again we see the heart of pride, the blatant attempt to rob God of His glory and glorify self. All of this came about because the Corinthians had gone beyond the teaching of Scripture. Which leads to the second effect of pride we see in this text that follows this distortion of Scripture: it *influences your practice*.

## **2. Influences your practice – *already/not yet eschatology* (v. 8)**

In verse 8, Paul revealed a particular area that the Corinthians had misinterpreted Scripture and how this had influenced their practice. He wrote, **“You are already filled, you have become rich, you have become kings without us.”** At face value, this is exactly what these at Corinth thought about themselves and even outwardly professed it just as poignantly as Paul does here. They were satisfied with themselves. They did consider themselves, just like the church at Laodicea that we read in our responsive reading, rich and wealthy and in need of nothing.

But in this context, Paul is going a bit deeper. He is not agreeing with their assessment of themselves but is showing them that their belief in this area came from their misunderstanding of Scripture in relation to the Lord’s return. This requires a bit of explanation. The Scriptures teach much concerning the kingdom of God. When we discuss the kingdom of God, we must understand that there is an already/not yet aspect to the kingdom in Scripture, what some call a “realized” or an “inaugurated” eschatology, and a “futurist” eschatology. In other words, in relation to the kingdom of God, some things have happened already, and some things will not happen until the Lord’s return. Missing this point often causes great confusion. For example, as we read in Ephesians 1 that we have already obtained an inheritance (Eph. 1:11). There is the very real truth that it is already ours. But in the same text we see the Holy Spirit given as a pledge of this inheritance because while it is ours, we have not yet received it in its fullness (Eph. 1:14).

We must keep a biblical balance regarding the Lord’s return. As D.A. Carson points out, if we devote too much time and energy toward the future, then we might become like those at Thessalonica who thought the Lord’s return was so imminent that they quit their jobs and sponged off of others that continued to work [*The Cross and Christians Ministry*, 104]. I have seen a more contemporary example of this in my lifetime. Some of you might remember a popular little booklet in 1988 by Edgar Whisenant, “88 Reasons Why the Lord Will Return in 1988.” Edgar Whisenant was a mathematician, and in this booklet he took the Old Testament feasts, festivals and numbers and played some rather interesting theological gymnastics with them. This little booklet, as I recall, was sent to every SBC pastor in the convention and soon

because of its overwhelming popularity, was almost impossible to get. Everyone jumped on the “88 Reasons” bandwagon. The booklet was quite convincing. The problem was that it was not quite biblical! The sad thing is that many people were so convinced by Whisenant’s theory that, believing that they would be raptured within the year, ran up exorbitant credit card debts in buying luxuries they could not afford to get one last hurrah in before they were gone. They had a biblical imbalance that influenced how they lived.

Now if I have not confused things too much, let’s go back to Corinth. They erred on the other side of the coin. They understood themselves to have received all of the promises, that the kingdom of God had already been fully realized. They took the promises of the future and reinterpreted them into the present. They believed that they had received all they were going to receive, that they were **“already filled, already rich.”** They thought that they were already reigning in the consummated kingdom of Christ. They were as full and as rich as they could or would get. This is why Paul made the statement, **“indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we might also reign with you.”** If they had truly already received their inheritance in it fullness, then this would mean that Christ had returned, that the consummated kingdom had begun, and that all believers were ruling alike with them. Paul would have rejoiced with them in that! But if Christ had not returned, then the Corinthian's were sadly mistaken. And, of course, this was the truth. Because of their distortion of Scripture, they justified their actions in the way they led the church and in the way they lived their lives. They allowed their pride to affect their understanding of Scripture concerning leadership and consequently this influenced the way they exhibited leadership. It is this that Paul rebuked with biting sarcasm in verses 9-13 where he brings to light the third effect of pride in this text: *ignoring the obvious*.

### 3. Ignoring the obvious (vv. 9-13)

In this section Paul contrasts the self-satisfaction of the Corinthians with the sufferings and lowliness of the apostles. Instead of reigning as kings, the apostles had suffered much and had been humiliated for the cause of the gospel. In verse 9, while accepting his apostleship, Paul began to describe what the life of an apostle was like. He described them as **“last of all”** and **“a spectacle to the world.”** Both of these described the *position* of the apostle. In a parade, the conquerors would lead the way and the conquered would be last, often laughed at and scorned. These prisoners were often taken to the theater where large crowds would gather to watch their execution. The apostles’ sufferings were witnessed by the entire universe, **“both to angels and men,”** a reference to the entire world, unseen and seen, spiritual and physical. The plight of the apostle escaped no one's notice.

The implications of this **“spectacle”** are drawn out in verses 10-13. Roger Ellsworth has broken these sufferings into three categories [*Strengthening Christ’s Church*, 73].

#### a. Personal indignities (v. 10)

The leaders in the church were popular in their own eyes, not based on biblical principles, but on human standards. Paul’s first list of contrasts deals with the indignity heaped on them for pursuing the cause of Christ. First, they were **“fools for Christ sake.”** In calling himself a fool, Paul brought to light the irony involved here. From the world’s perspective, they were deemed foolish to put their lives on the line for the gospel. But as Paul had already written in 1:25, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men.” These leaders had become wise in their own eyes. Paul says they were **“prudent in Christ.”** Paul is reminding them that they were relying on their own worldly insight rather than the revelation of Christ for their wisdom. In doing so, these leaders

were really the foolish ones. As Paul had written in 1:27, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.”

Second, Paul and others were “**weak**” but the leaders at Corinth were “**strong.**” Here again, Paul had written in 1:25, “The weakness of God is stronger than men.” Again, any person apart from the work of the Spirit would look at Paul and others as weak. But Paul knew that “God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong” (1:27). So Paul admits in 9:24 that “to the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.” And while others might look at those at Corinth as “**distinguished**” and Paul and others “**without honor**” Paul again is trying to get these men to understand that when it is all said and done, it is not the world’s judgments that matter, but God’s. These men continued to have their egos stroked at Corinth. But Paul, Apollos and others knew that the humble, not the proud, would inherit the kingdom of God.

#### **b. Physical deprivation (v. 11-12a)**

Paul then turns to what the world would consider to be physical infirmities, the plight of the down and out. They were “**hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless, toiling, working with their own hands.**” Paul again contrasts all of the worldly luxuries, what these at Corinth would no doubt consider blessings, with their livelihood. But what these at Corinth failed to realize is that Paul and others accepted this as part of their calling. Paul would later write in 9:14, “the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.” Paul preferred to work with his own hands so the spread of the gospel would not be hindered. The last thing Paul wanted was for some to look at him as profiting from the gospel. Therefore, from the world’s perspective, gospel work was a struggle to make ends meet. But from a spiritual perspective, Paul counted it joy. Paul was not suggesting that these at Corinth should become monks, selling all they had and withdrawing from the world. What he was saying was for them to consider their motive, and Paul saw that motive as being pride.

#### **c. Social ostracism (vv. 12b-13)**

Paul then shares further how they had become social outcasts for the sake of the gospel. They were “**persecuted,**” at times beaten and left for dead, but they endured for the sake of Christ. They did not seek to get even or retaliate. They simply used it as an opportunity to spread the gospel. They were “**slandered,**” talked about unfairly. Lies were spread about them and the work of their ministry. Every time he turned around Paul was trying to defend his work in the ministry, and yet in a conciliatory way, in a way that Christ might be honored and glorified. They had “**become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things.**” In other words, they were looked upon as the lowest of lowest. They were, in the lingo of a caste group, “untouchables.”

Why did Paul bring all of this up? Was Paul griping or asking the Corinthians to join in his pity party? No! Paul wrote these things because he wanted the Corinthians to see that they had it all wrong! Their pride was already wreaking havoc in the body. As Ellsworth put it, “The Corinthians were acting as if they had passed the apostles by, and Paul wants to know how they could have reached the goal while the apostles were still on the road!” [*Strengthening Christ’s Church*, 73]. Here Paul finishes what he began in chapter 3. Those that are called of God to lead His Church are to be serving, suffering and sacrificing for the sake of Christ. This is exhibited not in pride and arrogance but in deep humility and gratitude.

Lest we think that Paul is just some religious zealot in this regard, we need to look at this practically and historically. Simon Kistemaker wrote the following that serves as a reminder to us of what Paul was trying to get across to these at Corinth. Hear what he wrote:

Statistics reveal that the church increases numerically and spiritually in countries where persecutions, hardships, poverty, corruption, and distress are common. By comparison, church membership declines steadily in countries that exude affluence and ease. Whenever Christians are surrounded by material ease and comfort, *they often tend to forget the claims of Christ*. They become self-sufficient and, while maintaining a religious veneer, *have lost their love for Christ and the message of salvation*. [1 Corinthians, 142, italics mine]

This is what was happening at Corinth. The centrality of Christ had been forfeited for their ease and comfort all under the guise of religion. They had turned from reliance and dependence on God to relying on their own intellect and personal attainments. Whether they were doing it knowingly or not, their pride and arrogance had caused division in the church and had hindered the work of the gospel. It is for this reason that Paul has gone to such great lengths to expose the truth of what was going on in the church.

## II. An Appeal for Peace (vv. 14-21)

Paul does not simply expose the sinfulness of the Corinthian's pride and then simply walk away. He does not simply back up the dump truck, unload it, and leave them to figure it out on their own. His concern was with the devastating affects of this sin in the body. In closing this section of rebuke, which began all the way back in chapter 1, he offers an appeal for reconciliation. In doing so, he offers us a good pattern for approaching others we know are not living according to Scripture.

### 1. Compassion of a father (vv. 14-15)

Paul was concerned about how not only these leaders interpreted his harsh rebuke, but others in the congregation and other churches as well. He did not **“write these things to shame”** them. His purpose was not to run them down and make them a spectacle to others. His purpose, as he writes, was to **“admonish them.”** His hope was that they might recognize their pride and arrogance, repent of their sin, and therefore be reconciled to the body. His sincere desire was to restore peace in a body that had been fractured by personal goals and desires. And he does so with a vested interest. He addresses them as his **“beloved children.”** Paul's relationship with this church was more than merely peripheral. He had planted the church. Some remained that were his spiritual converts. He was their spiritual father. So he graciously and compassionately approaches them in this loving, spiritual relationship, as his **“beloved children.”**

He furthers his description of this relationship by reminding them that no matter how many came along behind him, he was their **“father through the gospel.”** He uses a term here, **“tutor,”** that would be easily discerned by those at Corinth. A literal translation would be that of a pedagogue, one hired by the biological father of a household to teach his children. In the Jewish world, the pedagogue was one that would tutor the children in the Torah. Paul's content here was not that tutors were not useful. His content was that no matter how many came behind him, nurturing and admonishing them in the Word, none could have the spiritual attachment to them that he had as their father. And as their father, he lovingly demonstrates his desire that they might be obedient children.

Discipline is never easy as a parent. We all remember the words of our parents in their loving discipline towards us, “This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.” While we might not understand it at the time, as we mature and become parents ourselves, we understand what our parents were saying. Here Paul demonstrates his love for them through his discipline. The easy road would have been to ignore these at Corinth in hopes that perhaps the problem would simply go away. But to do so would be to neglect his duty to them as their father.

## 2. Focused on Christ (vv. 16-17)

Paul then turns his attention to Christ, **“Therefore, I exhort you, be imitators of me.”** What does this have to do with focusing on Christ? It sounds as if Paul is guilty of the very pride of which he has been accusing these at Corinth. How much more arrogant can one be than exhorting others to imitate them? Here we need to remember the context. The very issue that started this whole mess at Corinth was the factionalism caused by some following Paul, others Apollos, some Cephas, and still others Christ (1:12). However, here’s the catch. It is not so much that they were following these men (especially Christ!), it is that they were following them for the wrong reasons. When Paul exhorts these to imitate him, he is not setting himself over against Apollos, Cephas or any other man. To do so would destroy his argument. What he is saying is as much as I am in Christ, as long as I am following him, then you imitate me. Paul here is reestablishing his authority as an apostle that had been neglected by these, his **“beloved children.”**

He reinforces what this imitation should look like in sending Timothy to them. Timothy would be an example of a **“faithful child,”** one that exhibited the life of Christ. In essence, Paul is sending his faithful son to his rebellious sons to tell them to be faithful too. But Paul had another thought in sending Timothy to Corinth, that he remind them of his **“ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.”** Here is where we see Paul’s desire that they be focused on Christ. What is it that he taught in every church? The gospel (1:17), the word of the cross (1:18), Christ crucified (1:23). In exhorting these at Corinth to imitate him, Paul is simply saying that as long as he is in Christ imitate him. As their spiritual father, Paul was their example. His goal is for them to obey Christ. As Ellsworth wrote, “Paul was so confident in his walk with the Lord that he could urge the Corinthians to imitate him” [*Strengthening Christ’s Church*, 77].

## 3. Confronts the problem (vv. 18-20)

Having approached them in compassion and focused their attention on the Cross, then Paul confronts the problem. Returning to the discussion on arrogance we see just how far down the road they had gone. Paul writes, **“Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you.”** Perhaps they thought that Paul had sent Timothy in his place. Perhaps they thought that Paul would not confront them. Maybe they thought that even if Paul did come, no one would listen to him. Whatever the case, these arrogant one’s doubted that Paul would come and spread this doubt among others. This shows that they did not understand the sinfulness of their sin. But Paul assures them, **“if the Lord wills,”** he was coming. And when he came, it would be not to hear what the arrogant were saying, the content of **“the words,”** but to examine their power. Paul was not concerned with their lofty discourses or their eloquent speeches. He wanted to know if they exhibited the power of the Spirit. Paul could not do this from afar. If he were there, face-to-face, they could not argue with his assessment.

Then in verse 20, in an interesting twist, Paul returns to the kingdom of God thought from verse 8. As we have seen, there were those who thought that they were living under the “already” aspect of the kingdom of God at the expense of the “not yet.” There, Paul debunked the thought that they had already attained all of the benefits of the kingdom by showing himself and the apostles as examples. Here, however, Paul alludes to what they have “already” as it pertains to the kingdom of God. This kingdom has been established in the souls of believers. His rule and His glory reign supreme in the heart of the believer. And this kingdom **“does not consist of words but in power.”** What power? The power of the gospel! When Paul arrived, he would examine these men in light of the power of the gospel. His purpose was, as D.A. Carson put it, “to expose them for the empty, religious windbags” that they were because “mere talk will not change people; the gospel will” [*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 113].

#### **4. Calls for a decision (v. 21)**

So the question was not whether Paul would come, but how he would come. This was up to these arrogant leaders. **“What do you desire? Paul asks. “Should I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?”** Paul is not setting discipline and love in opposition. He is simply stating that how he came to them would be based on their decision. The ball was in their court. If they repented of their arrogant, boastful pride, then he could come in peace, **“with love and a spirit of gentleness.”** If they did not repent, then he would exercise the necessary discipline.

#### **Conclusion**

*Pride and peace cannot coexist in the body of Christ.* This text leaves us with much to think about. Is it possible that pride has taken root in your heart? If so, heed the warning of what we have seen here. Pride will cause you to see Scripture in the wrong light, live the Christian life in the wrong way, and ignore what is obvious in those people and circumstances around you. If pride is an issue in your life, the Scriptures demand repentance. There is peace in Christ and Christ alone.

Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Ordinary on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter.

In the Name our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.