

Divisions in Corinth

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Passage: “...my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so *that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God*” (1 Cor 2:4-5, ESV).

Purpose Statement: Help the audience understand that *giving human leaders too much prominence poses a threat to unity*.

Introduction: The scandalous moral fall of popular faith leaders can be devastating to their admirers. **Ravi Zacharias** was an Indian-born Canadian-American who was involved in Christian apologetics¹ for more than forty years. When Zacharias died of cancer in May of 2020 at age 74, he was one of the most revered Christian leaders in the world. Mike Pence, vice president of the United States at the time, lamented the loss of “the greatest Christian apologist of this century,” comparing Zacharias to C.S. Lewis and Billy Graham. Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), whose mission was to help “the thinker believe and the believer think,” resonated across diverse cultures and denominations.

Within four months of the obituaries bearing his name, the venerated image of an anointed preacher came crashing down. In September 2020, three women came forward accusing the leader of sexual misconduct. All worked in spas frequented by Zacharias. After initially denying accounts of sexual misconduct, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries announced that an investigation² had found credible evidence of sexual misconduct spanning many years and multiple continents. Sadly, this was just one of many well-known (and lesser known) Christian leaders who have used their position of power to prey on the vulnerable; who have abused influence, power and trust to their own advantage; who have sinned sexually and financially; who have bullied those who work “for” them.

The danger of placing one’s faith in human leaders is not only that people can lose faith in God with the moral fall of their favorite preacher. Paul’s desire that the faith of the Corinthians “might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2:5) was expressed in the context of partisan factions that threatened to tear the church apart. Divisions existed among Jesus’ followers in Corinth because of an unhealthy admiration for and loyalty to leaders such as Paul, Apollos and Peter. This weighed heavy on Paul’s heart as he wrote 1 Corinthians. For Paul, the unity of God’s people was a huge priority.

¹ Apologetics is a term used to refer to the defense of the Christian faith. The Greek word apologia means “defense” as a lawyer gives at a trial. Apologetics provides an intellectual and reasonable explanation of Christian theology.

² The investigation was done by a Southeastern law firm, Miller & Martin, which RZIM hired in October of 2020.

Body:

- I. Among Jesus' followers in Corinth, divisions arose because some developed an unhealthy attachment to human teachers and leaders (**1:10-17**).
 - a. Paul urges the Corinthians "that there be no *divisions* among you, but that you be *united* in the same mind..." (**1:10**).
 - i. The Greek word *σχίσμα* (*schisma*, "divisions") is used again twice (11:18; 12:25).³
 - ii. Paul uses the Greek word *καταρτίζω* (*katartizō*, "united") again as he closes his second letter to the Corinthians, "Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration [*katartizō*], comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace..." (2 Cor 13:11).⁴
 - b. Paul has learned about the "divisions" and the "quarreling"⁵ through "Chloe's people" (**1:11**).
 - i. The Corinthians' letter to Paul was another source from which he received information (7:1).
 - ii. In addition, Paul may have received information from Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus (16:15-18) and Timothy (4:17).
 - iii. Perhaps even Apollos, who is in Ephesus when Paul writes 1 Corinthians (16:12), was a source of information.
 - c. Paul explains that the cause of the "divisions" was that some were saying, "I follow Paul," others "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas" or "I follow Christ" (**1:12**).
 - d. The fact that Paul has to clarify that he only baptized a handful of believers in Corinth (**1:13-16**) indicates the question of who baptized who seemed to contribute to the "divisions."

³ In its most basic sense, *schisma* refers to "the condition resulting from splitting or tearing, *tear*; *crack*" (William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p 981). It is translated as "tear" in Matthew 9:16.

⁴ These are the only occurrences of this word in Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians. In Mark 1:19, it is said that James and John were "mending [*katartizō*] their nets." Paul appeals to the Galatians to "restore [*katartizō*]" a brother who had fallen in transgression (Gal 6:1).

⁵ The Greek *ἐρις* (*eris*) appears only in Paul's letters and is translated as "strife" (3x), quarreling (3x), dissension(s) (2x) and "rivalry" (1x). It is always used for infighting that endangers God's people.

- e. Paul says that he was not sent to preach the gospel with “words [λόγου, *logou*] of ...wisdom [σοφία, *sophia*]” (1:17).
 - i. This is not a critique of Apollos, who was described by Luke as being “an eloquent [λόγιος, *logios*] man” (Acts 18:24).
 - ii. This is a critique of the Corinthians, whose fascination with wisdom (σοφία, *sophia*) empties the “cross of Christ...of its power.”⁶
 - iii. In contrast to Apollos, Paul “did not come proclaiming to you [Corinthians] the testimony of God with lofty [ὑπεροχὴν, *hyperochen*] speech [λόγου, *logou*] or wisdom [σοφία, *sophia*]” (2:1).
 - iv. It seems that some were discrediting Paul in Corinth, making comparisons to Apollo, pointing to his physical appearance and unimpressive oral presentation, “For they [Paul’s opponents] say, ‘His [Paul’s] letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech [λόγος, *logos*] of no account” (2 Cor 10:10).
 - v. Among Jesus’ followers in Corinth were “those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart” (2 Cor 5:12).
- II. Paul’s theological response to the divisions in Corinth involved placing their faith in “the power of God” rather than in human eloquence and wisdom (1:18—2:5).⁷
 - a. To the wise (σοφός, *sofos*) of this world, “the word of the cross is folly [μωρία, *moria*]”; to those who believe (vs 21), “the word of the cross is...the power [δύναμις, *dunamis*] of God” (1:18).
 - b. Paul references Isaiah to reinforce his critique of conventional wisdom: “...the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden” (1:19; cf Isa 29:14).
 - c. Paul contrasts the “wisdom [σοφία, *sophia*] of the world” with the “foolishness [μωρόν, *moron*]” of his preaching (κήρυγμα, *kērygma*) (1:20–25).

⁶ In a sense, their “quarreling” reflects worldly wisdom. In another sense, their fascination with worldly wisdom has contributed to their divisions. It is not clear which of these two scenarios is true of the Corinthians. Whatever the reason, 1 Corinthians 1:19-31 is a theological excursus in which Paul contrasts God’s wisdom with human wisdom in order to address the divisions over human teachers, which is mentioned again more explicitly in 1 Corinthians 3.

⁷ Paul’s theology (1:18-31) is shared in light of his concern about the Corinthians’ *schismata* (“divisions”) over human leaders (1:10-17).

- i. Among the proponents of “the wisdom of the world” are the “wise [σοφός, *sofos*]” (Greek philosophers), “the scribe” (Torah scholars) and “the debater of this age” (popular orators) (1:20).
 - ii. Paul reminds the Corinthians that “the world did not know God through wisdom [σοφία, *sophia*]” (1:21). This point will be repeated (2:8).
 - iii. Paul explains why “Christ crucified” was generally rejected by two cultural groups in Corinth—Jews and Greeks (1:22).⁸
 - iv. The idea of a crucified criminal being favored by God was offensive to Jews⁹ and ridiculous to Greeks¹⁰ (1:23).
 - v. But for God’s people, “both Jews and Greeks,” a crucified Messiah revealed both “the power and wisdom of God” (1:24-25).
- d. To further illustrate that “the world did not know God through wisdom (1:21), Paul reminds them that “not many” of Jesus’ followers in Corinth were highly educated, wealthy or powerful (1:26-28).
 - e. Paul’s excursus contrasting God’s wisdom with human wisdom (1:19-31) is “so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1:29).
 - f. Because God is the source of true wisdom, “let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord (1:30-31; cf Jer 9:23-24).
 - g. The focus of Paul’s *kērygma* among the Corinthians was “Jesus Christ and him crucified.”¹¹ Paul did not present the world’s wisdom (σοφία, *sophia*), nor was he concerned with impressing them with his appearance (2:1-4).
 - i. They needed to be reminded that it was the content of Paul’s preaching, not the manner of his presentation, that caused their transformation.
 - ii. Not only was the message of the cross (1:23) and God’s people in Corinth (1:26-29) “weak” and “foolish;” so was the messenger—Paul.

⁸ The Jews were looking for miraculous outward demonstrations to authenticate the coming of their Messiah (Mk 8:11-12). The Greeks, on the other hand, had a fascination with wisdom (*Sophia*). Greek philosophers, such as the Stoics and Epicureans, gave discourses on the “nature of the gods” as part of their search for wisdom.

⁹ Paul uses the Greek σκάνδαλον (*skandalon*), which literally means “a device for catching something alive, trap” (BDAG). It is found in the LXX in several places (Josh 23:13; Ps 140:9; Is 8:14, Ps 68:23).

¹⁰ Paul uses the Greek μωρία (*mōria*), which refers to people who lack sense. Jesus contrasts the foolish (*mōros*) with people who have intelligence (Matt 7:26; 25:2).

¹¹ Also among the Galatians “Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” through Paul’s *kērygma* (Gal 3:1).

- h. Paul's purpose in not trying to impress them by dazzling oratory was "so that your faith [πίστις, *pistis*] might not rest in the wisdom [σοφία, *sophia*] of men but in the power [δυνάμει, *dunamei*] of God" (2:5).
- III. Paul's theological digression also points out that God's wisdom is only discerned by the spiritually mature (2:6—3:4).
- a. God's "secret and hidden wisdom" is understood by the "mature," but not by "the rulers of this age" (2:6-9).
 - i. Paul strengthens his previous point that "the world did not know God through wisdom" (1:21) by pointing out that "the rulers of this age" are the ones who "crucified the Lord of glory" (2:8).
 - ii. Paul makes an allusion to Isaiah 64:4, which speaks of God's mysterious ways among men, "From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him."
 - iii. The things about God that "no one has heard or perceived" have been "prepared for those who love him" (2:9).
 - b. The hidden wisdom of God (Christ crucified) is revealed by the Spirit of God (2:10-13)
 - i. "...these things [about God that 'no one has heard or perceived'] God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (2:10).
 - ii. It is only "through the Spirit" that God's wisdom has been understood (2:11-12).
 - iii. God's servants "impart [λαλοῦμεν, *laloumen*] this [wisdom] in words [λόγοις, *logois*]...taught not by human wisdom [σοφία, *sophia*] but by the Spirit" (2:13).
 - c. Paul refers to μωρία (*mōria*, "folly") to show how "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God" (2:14; cf 1:18, 21; 3:19).
 - d. The "mature [τελείοις, *teleiois*]" are "spiritual [πνευματικοίς, *pneumatikos*]" and they "have the mind of Christ" (2:15-16).
 - i. For Paul, to have the mind of Jesus is to participate in the pattern of the cross (1:9; 4:9-13; 9:12, 15, 19; 13:7).

- ii. Walking in the Spirit results in the renunciation of all privilege, all boasting and quarreling.
 - e. Paul refers to the Corinthians, not “as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ” (3:1-2).¹²
 - f. For Paul, the measure of spiritual maturity is unity among God’s people. He points to their “jealousy [ζῆλος, *zelos*] and strife” as evidence of their spiritual immaturity (3:3-4).¹³
- IV. Paul explains that human leaders are merely agents used by God (3:5-15).
- a. They were “quarreling” because they were fascinated with the “earthen vessels”; the vehicles through whom God communicated his “treasure” (2 Cor 4:7); but Paul and Apollos are merely God’s “servants [δῆκονοι, *diakonoi*] through whom you believed” (3:5).
 - i. In a later letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants [δούλους] for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5).
 - ii. God’s messengers are “clay jars” that embody the gospel in their weakness, “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”
 - iii. The Corinthians needed to be reminded “that the surpassing power [δυνάμεως] belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7).
 - b. Paul uses two metaphors to illustrate that he and Apollos are merely instruments (3:6-15).
 - i. In an *agriculture metaphor*, Paul “planted” and Apollos “watered, but God gave the growth” (3:6).
 - ii. Neither Paul or Apollos are “anything, but only God who gives the growth” (3:7)
 - iii. Paul and Apollos “are one” (3:8).

¹² “The metaphors used here (adults vs. infants and solid food vs. milk) are stock language in relation to philosophical and religious instruction throughout the ancient world” (Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997. p 48).

¹³ When the Corinthians say “I follow Paul” or “I follow Apollos,” they are using an idiom (literally “I am of Paul” / “I am of Apollos”) that identified followers of teachers, children of parents, slaves of masters, worshipers of a god, clients of patrons, etc.

- iv. Paul and Apollos are “God’s fellow workers. You [Corinthians] are God’s field, God’s building” (3:9).
 - v. In a *building metaphor*, Paul “laid a foundation” and Apollos (and others) are “building upon it” (3:10).
 - vi. By saying, “Let each one take care how he builds on it,” Paul gives a subtle warning to certain leaders in Corinth who may be responsible for either causing or perpetuating divisions (3:10c-15).
- V. Paul continues warning those who may be causing divisions and explains why they will be held accountable (3:16-23).
- a. God’s people in Corinth are “God’s temple” and “God’s Spirit dwells in” them (3:16).
 - i. Both the verb and the second person pronoun are plural: “Do you not know [verb in second person plural form] that you [all] are the Temple [singular] of God and that God’s Spirit dwells in you [all]?”
 - ii. Paul’s point is that the Spirit dwells not in the individual bodies but in the Christian community in Corinth as a whole.
 - iii. He alludes to the presence of Israel’s God in the Jerusalem Temple, implying that God’s dwelling place on earth has been transferred to the church.
 - b. Therefore, those promoting divisions are destroying God’s “holy”¹⁴ temple (3:17).
 - i. Those splitting the community are destroying God’s chosen agency for proclaiming his character to the people of Corinth.
 - ii. Those promoting “jealousy and strife” are interfering with God’s chosen mode of presence and will be held accountable for their actions.”
 - c. Paul recalls earlier statements about wisdom and folly, and then warns against boasting “in men [‘whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas’]” (3:18-21a).
 - d. He then concludes with a powerful affirmation that not only the church and its leaders but everything else in creation belongs to God (3:21b-22).

¹⁴ The Greek word ἅγιος (*hagios*, “holy”) is common in the New Testament. It is a word that refers to God as a transcendent, unique and distinctive being (Rev 4:8). Jerusalem was referred to as a “holy city” (Matt 4:5). Jesus is “the Holy One of God” (Mk 1:24). John the Baptist was a “holy man” (Mk 6:20). It also refers to his people as separate from the culture and dedicated for a specific purpose in the world (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1).

VI. Paul portrays human leaders as suffering “servants”¹⁵ and faithful “stewards”¹⁶ who are accountable to God alone (4:1-13).

- a. When Paul speaks of the stewardship “of the mysteries of God” (4:1), he is referring to his message of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:1-2, 7).
- b. As “stewards” (*oikonomos*), Paul and his fellow workers are *accountable* to no one but God. Their goal is not to win a popularity contest among the Corinthians but to be trustworthy servants (4:2).
- c. Paul asserts his independence from the Corinthians’ judgments of him and his exclusive accountability to the Lord; he is not beholden to the Corinthians, for “it is the Lord who judges me” (4:3-4).
- d. A subtle warning to those who may be undermining his ministry in Corinth and promoting divisions is given when he says that God “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” (4:5).
- e. Paul continues stressing the senselessness of rallying around human leaders; he appeals “that none of you may be *puffed up*¹⁷ in favor of one against another [Paul and Apollos]” (4:6-7).
 - i. The verb *physioō* (“puffed up,” “arrogant”) is a vivid image to describe the Corinthians’ problem with excessive self-esteem (4:18–19; 5:2).
 - ii. Being “puffed up” with “knowledge” is set in opposition to love (8:1; 13:4).
- f. In sarcastic fashion, Paul contrasts his own way of life, which is consistent with the cross (mind) of Jesus, with that of the wisdom-boasters of Corinth (4:8-13).
 - i. Paul alludes to “the well-known practice of the Roman ‘triumph,’ in which the victorious general would parade through the streets in a

¹⁵ The Greek ὑπηρέτης (*hypēretēs*) refers to “one who functions as a helper, freq. in a subordinate capacity, *helper*, *assistant*” (William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p 1035). It literally means an “under rower,” but came to mean a subordinate servant more generally. This is the only time Paul uses this word. It is translated as “officers,” “guard(s),” “attendant”

¹⁶ The Greek οἰκονόμος (*oikonomos*) refers to “manager of a household or estate, (*house*) *steward*, *manager*” (William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p 698). Erastus is referred to as the *oikonomos* of the city of Corinth (Rom 16:23).

¹⁷ The Greek verb φυσίω (*physioō*) appears six times in 1 Corinthians. Paul is the only New Testament author who uses this word. The related noun φυσίωσις (*physiōsis*, “conceit,” ESV) appears in a list of vices in 2 Cor 12:20.

chariot, with the leaders of the defeated army trailing along in the rear of the procession, to be “exhibited” and humiliated as a public ‘spectacle’ (4:9) on their way to imprisonment or execution (cf. also 2 Cor. 2:14).¹⁸

- ii. The Corinthians are “wise,” “strong,” and “held in honor” (cf 1:26-31), whereas the apostles are “fools,” “weak,” and held in “disrepute” (4:10).
- iii. Paul’s list of his own sufferings (4:11-13) is repeated in his later letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 4:7-12; 6:4-5; 11:23-29; 12:10).

VII. Paul concludes by warning those causing divisions of his potential coming (4:14-21).

- a. Paul’s strong language is not intended to crush them, but to correct their behavior (4:14).
- b. Paul references his role as the founder of the church in Corinth: “in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel”; he also makes another allusion to leaders who may be contributing to the divisions—“though you have countless guides in Christ” (4:15).
- c. Based on his claim to have fathered them “through the gospel,” Paul invites the Corinthians to imitate him (4:16; cf 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6).
- d. Because Paul was unable to return to Corinth (16:8–9), he sent Timothy,¹⁹ “my ... *faithful* child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus as I teach them everywhere in every church” (4:17).
- e. Paul directly warns the group of troublemakers in the community, “Some are arrogant as though I were not coming to you” (4:18).²⁰
- f. Paul warns that he will “find out not the talk [*λόγον, logon*] of these arrogant but their power [*δύναμιν, dunamin*]” (4:19).
 - i. Paul had previously contrasted his lack of rhetorical refinement with the *power* of God which accompanied his preaching (2:4-5).

¹⁸ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 71.

¹⁹ Timothy’s exact location when Paul wrote this letter is not known. It doesn’t appear that he is with Paul, since he’s not mentioned in the salutation (1:1). However, Paul does not seem to think that he will have already arrived when they receive his letter (16:10).

²⁰ Gordon Fee sees that “the problem [in Corinth] is not simply internal division because they are ‘playing favorites’ with their leaders. Some in the community are decidedly anti-Paul” (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014, p 206).

- ii. He is threatening to expose the superficiality and falsehood of the arrogant Corinthian arguments.
- g. “For the kingdom of God consists not in talk [λόγῳ, *logo*, or rhetorical refinement] but in power [δυνάμει, *dunamei*]” (1 Cor. 4:20).
- h. Paul concludes with a threat that if these troublemakers continue instigating “divisions,” he will come to them with a “rod” to administer stern discipline; but if they repent of their boasting, he will come with “a spirit of gentleness” (4:21).

Conclusion: In the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses divisions that have arisen among Jesus’ followers in Corinth. These have developed due to an unhealthy attachment to human teachers and leaders. Paul addresses this problem theologically by appealing that their faith be placed in “the power of God” rather than in human eloquence and wisdom. He reminds them that their transformation was not based on impressive human rhetoric or wisdom, but through the vivid presentation of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Some in Corinth may have been comparing Apollos’ impressive rhetorical skills with Paul, whose approach among the Corinthians seems to have been less assuming (vs 3-4).

In his theological digression, Paul points out that God’s wisdom is only discerned by the spiritually mature (vs 6-16). He points out that their divisions show that they are living in the flesh, and are not spiritually mature (1 Cor 3:1-4). He explains that human leaders are merely agents used by God, and should not be regarded as anything more (vs 5-15). Paul warns those who may be causing divisions and explains why they will be held accountable (vs 16-18). Paul portrays human leaders as suffering “servants” and faithful “stewards” who are accountable to God alone (1 Cor 4:1-5). Paul concludes by warning those causing divisions of his potential coming (vs 18-21).

Throughout this section, Paul either alludes to or explicitly states the dangers of being “puffed up in favor of one against another” spiritual teacher (1 Cor 4:6): (1) human leaders can sometimes prove to be unfaithful (1 Cor 3:12-15; 4:2), and if this happens, people who follow them can be led astray; (2) over admiration for one leader can lead to an unhealthy depreciation of another; and (3) unhealthy regard for certain leaders can lead to a partisan spirit among God’s people, thereby defiling God’s chosen vehicle for displaying his character to the world.