

Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ – or Who?

This is no big deal, but it amazes me that people still indicate that the Corinthian disciples had formed quarreling parties claiming to follow Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ (1 Cor. 1:10f). There were divisive quarrels among them for which Paul was giving reproof, but the contentions were not centered around any or all of those mentioned.

Paul adapted a literary style intending to deal with this most serious problem as tactfully as possible. Dealing with the issue rather than the persons involved, he substituted his own name and those of other non-involved parties for those who were guilty. This would enable them to make correction with the least humiliation. Attacks on issues arouse less defense than those on persons. Putting one's self in a suspect position also takes the glaring light off the person who needs the message.

In discussing the matter on into Chapter 4, Paul inserts himself and Apollos particularly into the scene. Then, in Chapter 4:6, he explains, "I have applied all this to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brethren, that you may learn by us to live according to the scripture, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another." The ASV expresses it more clearly as "Now these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes... ." It was a literary device.

The Corinthian problem was not in exalting Paul but it involved disparaging him! In the remainder of the chapter, he reproaches their arrogance in displacing him. They were not building a party around him but were putting him down. He claimed his rightful place among them, declaring with sarcasm, "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" (v. 15). Those "countless guides" were discrediting Paul's apostleship in order to establish themselves as authentic teachers while they misdirected the disciples.

The specific issues over which they were dividing the people are not enumerated, but we can well suppose that the corrective teachings in the epistle addressed some of them. And since Paul always opposed by the ever-present Judaizers, we may speculate that they were the chief culprits in Corinth.

After addressing some of their problems in the next four chapters, in the ninth chapter he begins again a defense of his own standing among them. Evidently, the heretical leaders were unmoved by Paul's letter, so he wrote another. In it, though he still did not make it a personal issue by naming the guilty parties, he was much stronger in his portrayal and denunciation of them. We will not be so tedious as to mention all of Paul's defense in the epistle (the point does not deserve it), but much of the letter is a self-vindication.

For our purpose here, it will be sufficient to read 2 Corinthians 11. In biting sarcasm, he chides, "For if some one comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough. I think that I am not in the least inferior to these superlative apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not in knowledge; in every way we have made this plain to you in all things" (v. 4-6).

Then Paul unleashed his severest denunciation: “And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond with their deeds” (v. 12-15).

There is much more, but the point is clear. Paul was not the icon of one of the destructive parties in Corinth but he was demanding their unity and seeking to reclaim his place as their father in the gospel “that you can be proud of us as we can be of you, on the day of the Lord Jesus” (2 Cor. 1:14).

In a literary device intended to make his medicine easier to swallow, he had substituted himself, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ as icons in the place of the false apostles. []