

THE PERIL OF PUFFED-UP CHRISTIANITY

by Steve Zeisler

The Greek verb that describes the work of a bellows (*phusioo*) is used three times in 1 Corinthians 4. A bellows, of course, is an instrument which puffs air into the heart of the fire to make it hotter. We don't see them too much these days, but in the recent past they were used by blacksmiths and others to fan the fires over which they worked. When the apostle Paul uses the word in the context of this letter, however, he does so in order to describe people who are puffed up and self-important, individuals who like to call attention to themselves.

The word is used only seven times in the New Testament and six of those usages are in the book of 1 Corinthians. It is a term that describes a central problem of the Corinthian church. Being puffed up was characteristic of these believers. They had an air of arrogance and self-importance about them. Paul therefore takes pains to remind them of their problem and he does so by using *phusioo* to describe their attitude and behavior.

For a better understanding of this word, and a clearer understanding of chapter 4, a glance at the three other uses of the word in this letter will be helpful. In 5:2 Paul says, "You have become puffed up, and have not mourned instead..." He is speaking of a situation in the Corinthian church in which sin of a gross and perverted kind has been publicly acknowledged but otherwise overlooked. Paul is saying that the Corinthians had become so arrogant and self-important they were not even sorrowful over the blight upon the church that was prevalent among them.

Their sense of moral self-satisfaction is reminiscent of Revelation 3:17, where Jesus says to the church at Laodicea, "Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked..." In its arrogance, the church at Laodicea was blinded to its own dire need. The church at Corinth had much the same problem.

Most of us know someone who feels he or she is above the rules that govern all the rest of us. That is how the Corinthians felt. Many of the scandals to which our country has been exposed in recent years have come about because of this attitude that says, "Because of who I am, I deserve to be judged differently than others. Exclude me from these rules." This is Paul's charge against the body of believers in Corinth.

In 8:1, in a further usage of this word, Paul says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies." Some who feel they have superior insight regard themselves as a cut above the ordinary run of folk. They speak a jargon that outsiders do not understand. Whether their field is academics, computers, sports, whatever, their lingo excludes the uninitiated and uninformed, namely, the rest of us. To that mind-set, the apostle says simply, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies." The Corinthians took much pride in their understanding of the Scriptures. Arrogance, not love, therefore, was the characteristic they were demonstrating. They were flying in the face of the very quality--love--for which the church should be noted.

At our weekly staff Bible study we have been going through Romans, chapters 9 through 11. Last week a Stanford university classics professor, who describes himself as a Torah-observant Jew, came and joined our study. He gave us his perspective of Paul's argument in this section of Romans. This man is a brilliant scholar and linguist. He is thoroughly conversant not only with the Old Testament but also with the New. What impressed me most about him was his humility. He wanted us to understand his thoughts and he took pains to articulate them at a level that all of us could grasp and appreciate. I know other professors at Stanford who are not at all like that. Some of them seem to be committed to making those who don't understand them feel uncomfortable. As I listened to this man, however, I thought of Paul's word that knowledge in and of itself can make people feel awkward and shut out. Knowledge puffs up but love edifies.

Paul's third use of the word in Corinthians comes in chapter 13, the famous "love" chapter of this letter. In verse 4, the apostle says, "Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not puffed up..." This well-loved chapter on love comes in the middle of a long argument in which Paul notes that the Corinthians "are inclined to be contentious," to compete and fight among themselves. At one point he addresses certain of the women in the church who thoughtlessly used their new freedom in Christ to dishonor their husbands.

In chapter 14 the Corinthians' worship services, too, come in for some hard words from the apostle. They shouted incomprehensibly and outsiders felt cut off by their behavior at church services. Their self-indulgence had the effect of putting off outsiders, not drawing them into fellowship. Referring to their communion services, Paul writes, in chapter 11, "You despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing." The rich among them looked only to themselves, while the poor had scarcely enough to eat. Others of them became drunk at communion.

At another point the apostle felt compelled to say to them, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" They were so puffed up they had no need of certain others among them whom they felt were not as gifted and talented.

Love, says Paul, is not puffed up, but the Corinthians were. They were the peacocks of the early church. They were forever preening themselves and striking postures--and loving what they saw in their own reflections. An examination of this word therefore demonstrates that the apostle chose it carefully to point out to the Corinthians that puffed-up Christianity is a blight on the church. Style, not substance, glamor, not beauty, bluster, not power, may win human approval, but these things certainly don't impress God. This is Paul's argument.

Chapter 4 breaks down into three main sections. Speaking of himself in verses 1 through 5, Paul says that in the final analysis, no matter what anyone thinks of him, God is his judge. In the second section, verses 6 through 13, he almost stoops to sarcasm by contrasting the Corinthians' self-indulgence with the behavior of the apostles, which was to be imitated by believers. In the last section, verses 14 through 21, he draws the analogy of a father who is going to deal with his rebellious teenagers.

Chapter 4, verses 1-5:

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

In these verses Paul demonstrates that he had a marvelously healthy self-image. He knows who he is; he has settled all the big questions he had about himself. I feel that is what made the apostle such an effective servant of God. Of all the people I know, Ray Stedman has the healthiest self-image. To me, that is probably the most attractive thing about Ray. He has a profound sense that, by the grace of God, he is who he is. People who are constantly wondering about who they are and how they are coming across spend most of the time thinking about themselves and pondering what others think of them. They are forever playing to the crowds, forever taking their emotional temperature, forever working the bellows, puffing air into the particular balloon they feel compelled to float on any given day.

Here, by contrast, Paul lays out exactly who he is. In his words, he is a "servant of Christ," and a "steward of the mysteries of God." What people think of him does not concern him. Even what the Corinthians think of him doesn't faze him. He doesn't waste any time thinking of himself. He is free to be about the business of ministry, unencumbered by any baggage of how his behavior may seem to others. And the reason he is free,

he says, is his knowledge that God is his judge. He is the one who will examine everything in time.

Let us look at these two words which Paul uses to describe himself. The word for servant, *huperetes*, means "under-rower." Paul is referring to a galley slave, one who spent his days chained below the decks of a boat, rowing in concert with other slaves to move the boat upon the water. Galley slaves asked no questions; they concentrated on doing what the slavemaster directed. Paul had one Master whom he obeyed. He was not a servant of men to make them happy with him. He owed no allegiance to others to place himself under them for a yearly review.

What a healthy self-image! For the sake of love Paul gave himself away to everyone, but he did not feel compelled to obey anyone except the Lord. "I owe my soul to the company store," went the line in a popular ballad some years ago. That was not Paul's refrain. He was sold out to his God and Savior. As a servant of Christ he did not have to explain himself or excuse himself to any man.

Then, says Paul, he is a "steward of the mysteries of God." In New Testament times, "steward" was the title of the household slave who had charge of all his master's affairs. This was the role Joseph had in Potiphar's household in the Old Testament; he was the chief steward of his master's household. That was Paul's job description also. He had charge of dispensing valuable commodities for his Master--the "mysteries" of God, the secrets which the natural man has no access to; the wonderful truths that help us become fully human, truths that will help us live as God intended us to live. Paul said he was a steward of these secrets, and his ministry was to dispense them to a needy world.

Furthermore, says Paul, "it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy." God would hold him accountable for the faithfulness of his stewardship. Imagine a medical emergency team entering a Third World country carrying with them certain medications which would relieve people suffering the effects of a terrible disease. The country has neither the ability nor the knowledge to produce the medication which can save the people. But then a medical team arrives and begins to dispense the medicine, which effects a cure and begins to bring life and hope to people once again.

This is an analogy to what Paul is saying here. He is a steward of an extraordinarily valuable commodity: the truth which will give life and hope to a dying people. But God would hold him accountable for his stewardship of that truth. "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful." Ray Stedman calls these "mysteries of God," "the lost secrets of our humanity." Those who will take up the challenge can declare these truths and thereby bring life to needy people.

Verses 3 through 5 carry on in some measure Paul's statement that he is free of human examination. He does not mind what people think of him. In fact, he does not even spend time in self-examination, wondering about his own psyche and talking about himself. He knows that the day is coming when he will be judged by the Lord. Even if he wanted to judge himself, he could not discern whether his conscience knew what it was doing, or whether he should trust it. Meanwhile, he made it his aim to be about God's business, trusting that his Father would one day sort it out.

Many of us analyze ourselves so much we use it as a convenient way to be preoccupied with ourselves all the time. Others are profoundly concerned for what people think about them. They constantly monitor all the signs which people project, seeking clues to how they are coming across. But Paul just got on with the job at hand. Here he contrasts himself with the puffed-up Corinthian Christians for whom superior knowledge, competitiveness and appearances were the critical things in life. But Paul says he was an under-rower and a steward of the mysteries of God. How he was coming across to others, or what he thought about himself, were no big deal to him.

What was supremely important, however, was that the day was coming when the Lord would judge him. Paul would leave the judging to God, who would praise him on that day for what was praiseworthy in his life. God's judgment of believers is always directed towards praise. He will find things in our lives for which he will commend us.

The apostle says two very important things in verse 5. In judgment, God "will bring to light things hidden in

the darkness," and "he will disclose the motives of men's hearts." Our judgment involves only public actions; we obviously cannot judge "hidden" things. But God will bring those hidden things out into judgment. We therefore ought to remember that if we insist on making determinations about one another, we will never get to judge the hidden things. We ought to be willing to suspend judgment even about ourselves.

Furthermore, says Paul, God will judge motives. In deciding what someone is like, it is important to not only know what they did, but why they did it. Motives are critical. You may have done splendid things, and received praise for doing them, but you may have done them for the wrong reasons. Those things will have little value in God's judgment. But God will see something praiseworthy about other things which you put down, perhaps even negative actions, because they may have been motivated for the right reasons.

I once debated a woman who held the pro-choice position regarding abortion. Afterwards I realized that we had just talked past each other for about an hour and a half. Nothing either of us said made sense to the other. I kept referring to lives made in the image of God that were forfeit due to abortion on demand; the callous disregard for what it meant to be human, etc. Every time she spoke she talked about the desperate plight of 13-year-old girls who had been abused, and so forth. I didn't realize until later how similar our motives were. I still consider her judgment to be dangerously misguided, her stated position a tragedy, but what was motivating her was much better than what I was crediting her. She was trying to alleviate suffering.

At times, actions which we as Christians judge and reject, and properly so, may still have a good motivation which only God can see. While it is right for us to take a stand on whether or not a certain action is proper, in the long run we cannot judge the people who advocate the action because we cannot know their motives. That is why Paul says he will not judge motives; he will leave that to God. His revealing of his essential motivation here is intended to shake a puffed-up body of believers. He is showing them a much more effective way to behave.

Verse 6:

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become puffed up (*phusioo*) in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? For you are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we might also reign with you. For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

The Corinthians, as we have pointed out, were filled with a sense of their own importance. Here Paul says to them, "You are prudent and wise. You reign as kings. You are sleek, fat, and satisfied with yourselves. You make fun of those who do not know the Lord and look down on those who are younger in Christ than you are." By contrast, the apostles, their fathers in Christ, have as servants and stewards of God the assignment of fighting a difficult war. When they are reviled, they respond by being conciliatory. They work with their hands so as to have something to give away. They are willing to be misunderstood and put down.

Notice that the apostle is not complaining. It's all right with him. It makes sense to him that the Lord would give him the assignment of being the "scum of the earth." The most effective ministry comes through people who are radically different than the world because they don't demand anything in return. In that respect they are like their Lord. No, Paul is not complaining about his lot as an apostle. What he is saying, rather, is, "Look at yourselves in comparison. In your arrogance you imagine that you yourselves have created the gifts

you have been given. Where's your basis for pride, when your gifts are the result of another's sacrifice? I wish you did reign as kings, because if you did, we would reign with you. Don't you know that all of us will reign only on the day when the Lord returns? You're deceiving yourselves. Compare what you say of yourselves to us, and the life which God has assigned us."

There is a foul lie being spread that God wants all Christians to be rich, healthy and satisfied. And if you as a Christian do not have those things, this teaching holds, you are either lacking in faith or you need to contribute more money. Do you see how directly and forcefully Paul in these verses contradicts that message? The notion that we work the Christian faith to our own selfish advantage is a gross perversion.

Verse 14:

I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. Now some have become puffed up (phusioo) as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are puffed up (phusioo) but their power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

When I was about 16, I went on an escapade with some friends one evening which involved a minor act of vandalism. We planned on cleverly defacing some public property. Commando-style, we wore dark clothes and stocking caps. We were excited that the world would discover next morning how clever we were. But then we got caught. As I thought about the next day and the meeting I had to face with my father, all the sense of exhilaration disappeared. The drama, the cleverness and our beat-the-system attitude dissipated in the face of the forthcoming meeting with someone who very definitely disapproved of what I had done. This is what the Corinthians were facing in their forthcoming meeting with Paul.

One of the drawbacks of being puffed up was that they could not back up what they thought about themselves. They had to keep puffing air into their balloon all the time. They loved to meet in small groups and pat themselves on the back, but what if somebody came to test what they believed about themselves? That was what Paul, their father in the Lord, was planning on doing. He hoped he would see some touch of God in their lives, some way in which they could appeal to the Scriptures, by the power of God through the Holy Spirit, what they were advocating. Could they defend their selfishness? They could learn from Timothy, whom he was sending to them. If they did not, then he himself would come to examine what they had become. And, depending on their response, Paul could come and hug them, or else he would deflate them.

"The kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power." For every self-important person, every peacock, a time will come when they must back up what they say. Then they will not be able to merely talk about things, but do them. Somebody will demand that they live on the basis of their supposed knowledge, on their supposed relationship with God. That is when those who are merely puffed up and arrogant, who merely talk a good game, will fail the test. Paul said he was a "servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God." He did not claim to be doing everything right but was content to let God sort it all out at the end. An examination of his life would reveal that he could back up what he said. The evidence would show that the power of God enabled him to be victorious despite difficult circumstances. There was evidence that by the power of his gospel, people who were spiritually dead were becoming spiritually alive. But nothing in the Corinthians' self-promotion would back up what they imagined to be true of themselves.

Following the St. Louis Cardinals' win over the Giants in the National League playoffs, Ozzie Smith made a very insightful comment about the series: "They came to talk," he said, "we came to play." As much as I hate the reality of that comment, I'm afraid he was right. The young and untested Giants were more impressed with themselves than they should have been. When the ultimate test came, they couldn't carry out what they said they would do.

As far as the Corinthians are concerned, that is the apostle's final point in this chapter. Arrogance will always misrepresent the truth, and arrogance will always fail in the end. Hot air will not avail much when action is required. "The kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power." Helium balloons are fun to play with the first day they are inflated. They rise effortlessly to the ceiling and remain there, colorful and out of reach. But after a few hours the helium begins to leak out and they descend to the floor. Paul is writing to a body of believers who are on a high. They are "balloon Christians." But the time has come when they must either put up or shut up.

There is a kind of Christianity that is filled with confidence in God, its self-worth based on the calling of God. It trusts in the judgment of God and the praise that will one day come from him. Speaking as their spiritual father, Paul commends that kind of Christianity to the church at Corinth. "The kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power."

Lord, we confess that at times we talk too much. We look down our noses at others. We revel at inside information, and are puffed up rather than loving. Deliver us from these things, we pray. Teach us to be your servants and stewards, to live out our lives, trusting you for the last analysis. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Steve Zeisler
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