

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 God's Co-Workers Falls Ch. PM 1/28/2024

In the previous passage, believers are Spiritual persons who also have the mind of Christ. Great! Then why was the church in Corinth having problems? Because even people who are spiritual persons and have the mind of Christ, can still have needed improvements!

The church is not a museum of all perfectly-formed saints. We cannot slowly tour through the church on earth and gaze upon Christians and say, "Oh, look at him – so perfect." Oh, look at her, flawlessly reflecting the glory of God! No, we have all fallen short of the glory of God.

So, instead of a museum of perfect people, we must think of the church as an art workshop for saints who are still works in progress, still sinners needing to learn the ways of Christ better. As we tour the art workshop, and we stop to consider each piece of art, we can see what God is working on, and we can imagine all the beauty of what will be. However, we notice that it is not ready for a museum, each is a masterpiece not yet finished.

We look through the church in Corinth, and what do we see? Pieces of art, not yet finished.

Christ warned us about immaturity in God's co-workers.

CROSS – by Christ's death and resurrection we have been brought into the church as unfinished art projects of God. The phrase in verse 1 is "In Christ" that is repeated in Paul's writings 166 times. This refers to Christ's death and resurrection, and the resulting fact that by His gift of salvation, and his gift of faith, that we are found IN CHRIST. That is the gospel news, which we gather to celebrate.

1. The Spiritually immature = milk-fed = fleshly = have jealousy/strife. (v.1-3)

Verses 1-3, "*But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?*"

Back in chapter two, Paul was writing about the Spirit, and the wisdom given by the Spirit. Here in chapter 3, Paul is now building on that. The wonder of what the Spirit can reveal to us surpasses all human educational institutions and all human imaginations. We truly Spiritual persons have received an incredible gift from God, which is the mind of Christ. By the mind of Christ, we are assured of our salvation, and that assurance comes through knowing God Himself.

What a blessedness is ours! It is truly a privilege.

Now the question is: have these people, to whom Paul is writing, received the mind of Christ? Have the Corinthians received the Spirit of Christ, and have

they become Spiritual persons? That is the issue in verse 1. Are they spiritual people? Surprisingly, in verse 1, Paul could not address them as so, which means that they were not acting like Spiritual persons. They were not behaving as if they had received the mind of Christ and the Spirit of Christ. Paul needed to address them according to their performance - they were in need of teaching that met them where they were – as infants in Christ. Their operations were infantile. They were being childish. Acting like spiritual babies.

That was a bad sign. They were still moved by human drives. They seemed to be fleshly. They lived not according to the Spirit who unifies, but rather they live according to the flesh that separates and wars. As Paul wrote in chapter 1, the bad indicator in the church in Corinth was their divisions and rivalries, the formation of mini-groups within the church of Corinth. The groups had jealousy against the other groups, and strife between the groups. That was not spiritual. That was not guided or produced by the Spirit of Christ.

Notice that Paul considered them Christians! Don't be confused on that. Paul was not doubting their conversions. But Paul was being blunt and direct – they were acting as immature Christians. They were not ready for the museum – they were works in progress. They had things left to learn. Paul confronted them in our passage today for thinking and behaving in infantile ways.

They could not have both the label mature and the label jealous. Think about it – if they had various groups all splitting off, and then everyone claimed that “we are the people of the Spirit” wouldn't that look out of place? But there was hope for the splintering people of Corinth, and that hope was the real reason why any church has unity today. Unity in a church is not because each of us is so wonderful. Unity in a church is because Christ has poured these gifts: the mind of Christ, the Spirit of Christ, the growing and maturing of God's work on us, and an appetite beyond milk, and the ability to digest solid spiritual food and teaching.

Verse 3 has the prepositional phrase “of the flesh” two times, because that is Paul's topic. It is of the flesh to not be ready to move from milk to solid spiritual food and teaching. It is of the flesh to depend on self. It is of the flesh to possess jealously. It is of the flesh to have strife among believers.

The cure is to leave “of the flesh” and move to “of the Spirit” It is of the Spirit to remember that we are brothers and sisters. It is “of the Spirit” to depend on the Spirit to help us face our jealousy, our strife, our distaste for solid food.

Fleshly refers to an impulse that is not communal, but is individual, so that that person's own success is more important to him or her than group success.

Spiritual refers to the impulse that IS communal, so that my success is now defined as group success. Of the Spirit refers to the spiritual truth of community.

Of the Flesh = self-interest, self-absorbed, or immature.

Of the Spirit = church-wide interest, group-focused, and mature.

Of the Flesh – to be competitive is to be naïve, and not yet having learned the important meaty spiritual truth that we are all on the same team!

Of the Spirit – gospel focused, Christ-glorifying, unifying, mutually encouraging mindset that says if another person is heavily gifted, that is to our gain. We don't need to compete. We don't need to stand out. We are not forgotten.

Paul's use of the milk or solid food comparison, the issue of diet, is a key indicator of maturity level. A baby nurses from a mother or a bottle. When the baby is weaned from milk, that is a significant growth step, and a big indicator.

The diet change shows something important.

How is that an illustration of spiritual truth? It is like milk to hear and follow the teachings of Christ's forgiveness of our sins. But what about more complex issues? Paul was preparing them for the rest of this letter, when Paul will write about marriage and celibacy, ethical conduct, the nature of freedom regarding food offered to idols, the teaching of the Lord's Supper, how spiritual gifts work, including speaking in tongues, and the endless applications from the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and how that impacts everything. Were they ready for those deeper subjects? No. Why not? Because they still did not even apply to themselves the basic teaching that we are all on the same team, and that we are supposed to be each other's biggest supporters, not each other's biggest opponents. That brings us to our second point.

2. Over-loyalty to certain persons is a sign of immaturity. (v.4-5)

Verses 4-5, *"For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each."*

In verse 4, Paul says it is human to have favorites. The preference for a certain person is a sign of humanity. We all have people we like. But the insistence on a certain person is a sign of immaturity.

The flesh is there because the question is whom do I like? In that, we have already lost the question – what does God have to say to me today in His Word?

I know a minister who is very, very popular. I don't mean I know him personally. I just mean that I heard this story. In his church, he decided to open up a mid-week Bible study. So, they decided to host the Bible study at the church building, and they had to move it from one of the side rooms to the main worship hall, because of how many people showed up the first night. 800 people. Now I grant you that the man is a wonderful teacher. If I said his name, you would probably know that name. But one has to wonder, if it was one certain minister and only 8 people will show up, and it was another certain minister and 800 people show up, what exactly is going on there?

What is going on there is two things 1) a great teacher and 2) the danger of following a person. If it was Paul, 800 people show up, but if it was Apollos, only 8 show up? Or, was it the other way around?

Here is the real question - are they coming to hear Paul, Apollos, or Christ?

SI – We make a big deal of Reformation Day each year, and we ask you to learn again with us about what God did through the Reformers. But today I warn you about having a favorite reformer!

We follow Christ. We don't follow anyone else. We agree with Calvin, but we are not groupies of Calvin. We are not followers of Luther. We don't even follow the apostle Paul. We follow Christ.

We all have favorite teachers and authors. Many of you have told me how much you have benefited over the years from the teaching ministry of R. C. Sproul, and other well-known teachers. These men were gifts from God.

But we cannot insist on them, and become groupies. We follow Christ.

3. The mature know their place, and support all glory going to God. (v.6-9)

Verses 6-9, *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building."*

In verse 6, Paul wrote that Paul planted, which means Paul was the first one to bring the seeds of the gospel into Corinth. The first one to tell them about Christ.

Paul then wrote that *Apollos watered*, which meant that Apollos was the second one to tell them about Christ. Then there were others.

Many of us even have a special fondness in our memories for the preacher who led us to Christ for our conversion.

But Paul was cautioning us here to remain focused on the Lord God. Paul put it ever so clearly in verse 7. Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything. That means they are nothing! Calvin and Knox and Wycliffe and Tyndale and are nothing. R. C. Sproul and Keller and DeYoung are nothing.

All that matters is Christ, the only One who died for us on the cross, and Christ the only One who rose again for us, and Christ the only One who gives us growth and gives us His Spirit and His Word.

In verse 8, all of the apostles and ministers say this in unison, because we are one. He who plants (which was Paul), and he who waters (which was Apollos), are all one – they are unified in message and mindset and outlook. Paul would say amen. Apollos would say amen. Every minister since then would say amen.

That is part of why it is so immature to follow a certain human. Any human worth listening to, would say "don't you dare follow me, only follow Christ."

Apostles came and went. Reformers came and went. Ministers come and go,

but the work of Christ continues in His church and in the world.

Verse 9 – Paul ends with three illustrations. We are God’s fellow workers, God’s field, and God’s building.

The central truth of all three illustrations is that we belong to God. The work we do is Christ’s work, our work belongs to Christ. The field belongs to God. The building up of the church world-wide, all belongs to God.

We are not about any individual superstar. A building is not built with one fancy brick. A building is built with many, many regular bricks, and one..... cornerstone. Christ is our cornerstone.

SI – when have you ever seen a secret service agent posing for the next photo from the media? That would be silly, because we all understand that the secret service agent is doing a job and is to be considered invisible.

That how all Christians must be considered. When does the Christian draw attention to himself or herself? I am Apollos, look at me, follow me! No way. We all must understand that Apollos is on the job, and Apollos is to be considered invisible. Paul is to be considered invisible. All eyes on Christ.

Conclusion: *Be patient with God’s co-workers.*

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright once told of an incident that may have seemed insignificant at the time, but it had a profound influence on the rest of his life. The winter he was only 9 years old, he went walking across a snow-covered field with his reserved, no-nonsense uncle. When the two of them reached the far end of the field, his uncle stopped him. His uncle had the boy turn around and look at their tracks in the snowy field. His uncle pointed out his own tracks in the snow, straight and true as an arrow's flight. Then his uncle pointed out then young boy's tracks meandering all over the field. His uncle said this, "Notice how your tracks wander aimlessly from the fence to the cattle to the woods and back again," his uncle said. "And see how my tracks aim directly to my goal. There is an important lesson in that."

Years later the world-famous architect liked to tell how this experience had greatly contributed to his philosophy in life. "I determined right then," he'd say with a twinkle in his eye, "not to miss most things in life, as my uncle had."

You might not understand how this illustration fits with the sermon. Here it is – you are not in charge of God’s fellow workers - God is! You are not in charge of God’s co-workers, God is. This is a key mindset for unity.

When we see someone wandering around in the field of God, and we become annoyed that he or she doesn’t walk a straight line, we ought not to assume that we know what God is doing with other people’s lives and with their service to Christ.

All three of the closing illustrations of our passage communicate the same thing. Being patient with each other, because we are on the same team – we are all

God's co-workers, God's fellow workers. We are all in God's one field. We are all in God's one building that God Himself is constructing. We are one people, working for one God.

We all work for Christ. We all take our orders from Him. We are co-workers of Christ, and therefore, we are co-workers of one another within the Kingdom of God. We each have a part to fulfill. Some play viola, some make desserts, and some make everyone feel welcome. Some go as missionaries, and some send, support, and keep on praying for missionaries.

Some plant. Some water. Only God causes the increase.

Remember, we are all pieces of art, not yet finished. We are called to be patient with each other.

We must have planting of the Word of Christ.

We must have watering of the Word of Christ.

But all of it amounts to nothing without the germinating and life-giving ministry of the Spirit of Christ.

We need a lot of workers in the fields of God and in the building up of the church of Jesus Christ on earth around the world.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "I will build My church."

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