

Servants in God's Fields

1 Corinthians 3:1-9
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¹But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for 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? ⁴For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? ⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 (ESV)

As we examine these verses, we must first call to mind Paul's deep love for the Corinthian Christians. In the opening verses of this book, Paul has made it quite clear that he lives in a state of constant thanksgiving for the Corinthians (1:4), and at the end of the book Paul expresses his real love for them (16:24). It is precisely because Paul truly loves the Corinthians that he is now brutally honest with them. By Paul's assessment, the Corinthian Christians are not "spiritual people," instead they are "people of the flesh," and mere "infants in Christ" (v. 1).

In the first four verses, Paul directs the Corinthians, in no uncertain terms, to "grow up." Here Paul addresses the Corinthians as their spiritual father, and his message is simple, "Stop your jealousy and your strife. Stop acting like you are not Christians. Grow up."¹ Then in verses 5-9, Paul begins to point them down the path to growth and maturity by reminding them that God is the hero of the Corinthian church. Paul's message in these verses can thus be summarized, "Grow up and remember that God is the true hero and champion over his church."

Grow Up

Throughout his New Testament epistles, we find Paul constantly working and striving for the growth and maturity of Christian believers. For example, Paul will tell the Colossian Christians that he proclaims Christ and warns and teaches everyone, so that he may present everyone "mature in Christ." He continues, "For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (Col. 1:28-29). Clearly a major aspect of Paul's Christian labor and pastoral ministry is in the direction of establishing mature, well-grounded, fully developed Christian believers. The Corinthians, however, just aren't there. In fact, they are not even heading in that direction. So in v. 1, Paul simply states the facts, "**But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.**"

First he tells them that they are not spiritual people. Although they have the Spirit of God they are simply not behaving in line with that reality.² Here Paul acknowledges that he cannot speak to them as though they were spiritual people. Although they have an abundance of spiritual gifts in their church, even supernatural and miraculous gifts, they are not spiritually mature. Next Paul tells them that they are instead “people of the flesh.” Obviously Paul has decided that the Corinthians need some kind of intervention, and he is doing just that. Their situation is serious, so he repeats the same idea in v. 3, “for you are still of the flesh.”

Paul’s language is quite difficult. His gloves are off and in his zeal for correcting the Corinthians, he has taken us into uncomfortable and unfamiliar territory. We do not normally talk or think of Christian people as being “of the flesh.” In fact, because of the difficulty of Paul’s language here, some Christians have understood Paul’s teaching to mean that there are two types of Christians: The “spiritual” Christian who is generally growing and striving to walk by God’s Spirit; and the “carnal” Christian who is not. Those who hold to this “carnal Christian” doctrine believe that certain types of Christians have received Jesus as savior, they have truly and sincerely trusted in Christ, yet they do not desire to follow Christ and make him their Lord. Thus, according to this teaching, the carnal Christian does not love Christ, does not grow in maturity, does not obey God’s law, does not desire to worship God and put sin to death, and generally is living a defeated life.

One of the most significant problems with this carnal Christian view is that it can lead people who do not love Christ to believe that they are Christians. They have said a simple prayer of faith, but that prayer has been said without the intention or desire to ever follow Christ, worship God, or live in step with God’s Spirit. Under the carnal Christian doctrine, the prayer of faith often times becomes nothing more than a “work” we must do, and all the while the work God must do, regeneration, is forgotten. Thus, having said the prayer, some are led to believe that they have gotten into heaven while they can still literally live like hell.

All of this, of course, is contrary to God’s Word. While Christians do sin, even seriously at times, what they can never do is continuously reject Christ’s lordship over their lives. Christians are, by definition, new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). They have new hearts, new minds, new reasons to worship and obey God, and Jesus is unquestionably their Lord.

So indeed, becoming a Christian is actually easy. Nothing is required of us but faith, and even that faith is a gift from God. But being a Christian requires absolutely everything. The Bible knows nothing of the “carnal Christian” who never follows or delights in Christ. Instead, Christians are called to take up their crosses and follow Jesus. They are called to put sin to death. They are called to grow in their love and delight in the Lord. They are called to long for Christ and his Word. Every Christian is called to maturity and growth. Rather than teaching that there are such things as carnal Christians who never grow or advance in the faith, the Bible instead tells us that “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

Paul calls the Corinthians “people of the flesh,” not to identify different types of Christians (carnal vs. spiritual), but to show them the absurdity of their behavior. They are Christians, they are new creations, they have received new hearts and minds, and yet

they are still acting as if they have not. In sum, they are not mature, nor are they headed toward maturity. They are "infants in Christ" (v. 1).

In the New Testament the Greek word for "infant" is almost always used in the pejorative sense.³ The King James language of "babes in Christ" captures Paul's idea well. Paul is telling the Corinthians that they are acting like babies. Of course, as much as we love and adore the little ones, we know that babies can do nothing for themselves, they think of no one but themselves, and they are waited on hand and foot by mom and dad. One could say that babies have it made, all of their needs immediately provided for. There is nothing more demanding than having a baby, and nothing less demanding than being a baby. While babies are utterly delightful, there is nothing less delightful than adults who act like babies. As "babes in Christ," the Corinthians were doing just that, thinking only of themselves, living in constant "jealousy and strife" (v. 3).

Paul continues, "**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?**" (vv. 2-3). The Corinthians cannot handle solid spiritual food. When served healthy portions of God's truth and wisdom, they are not able to digest it for themselves, so Paul has to break everything down for them. He can only give them milk.

The absurdity of the Corinthian immaturity is well illustrated by Paul's "milk" analogy. Imagine if a dear friend invited you over for dinner, and then as you sat down to the table to be served he sat before you a large baby bottle full of infant formula as the main course. That would be absurd, of course. Adults require weightier food, tastier food, solid food. Paul is telling the Corinthians that when they sit down to feed on God's Word, they should by now be eating solid spiritual food, but instead they remain in this absurd situation of still needing spiritual milk. Paul is not pleased with the Corinthians' progress in the faith, so his message to them is "grow up."

As Paul uses the analogy of "solid food" and "milk" we should be careful not to think that Paul is advocating different doctrines for Christians at different stages of growth. Paul has already clearly expressed to the Corinthians that the message and doctrines he promoted are somewhat singular, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Some believe that the gospel is simple food for new Christians and that once the gospel is embraced and believed we ought to move on to different, weightier doctrines. This is not so. Here Paul is simply saying that he should by now be able to serve up the same doctrines, the doctrines of the gospel and of Christ, in different, weightier ways. John Calvin says, "The same Christ is milk for babes and solid food for adults."⁴ At the very least, the Corinthians should have by now matured to a point in which they understood that the gospel message requires humility, forbids boasting, and puts an end to jealousy and strife among Christians.

Paul has told the Corinthians to grow up, to learn to digest spiritual truth for themselves, and to stop being full of jealousy and strife. We must therefore ask ourselves, "Am I growing in Christian maturity as I ought? Am I moving on from milk to meat? Am I digesting Christian truth on my own?"

It may be that you are a relatively new Christian, a true babe in Christ, and that is ok. If this is your situation you must remember that true growth in Christian maturity is not easy and it does not happen quickly, so do not be discouraged if your diet is still primarily spiritual milk. Instead, continue down that path of steady, faithful growth

learning Christ and his gospel at every step. The Christian life is not a sprint; it's a pretty long race. And just as babies do not enter the world eating meat, we must not expect to be doctors of the faith overnight. But we must steadily keep growing, keep learning, and keep feeding on God's Word.

It may be that you are a long-time Christian, but you do, in fact, need to be told to "grow up." Most of us inherently know that babies have it pretty easy, thinking only of themselves, their every need met by someone else. We also inherently know that true growth in Christian maturity is not easy. The biblical language of striving toward growth and maturity, of going to war against sin and mortifying it, of training diligently and running the race well, is quite difficult. Indeed, true growth in Christian maturity is extremely demanding. When we learn what the Christian faith requires of us, we can be tempted to think, "I'm doing pretty well right here. I've grown enough. I've given enough. I'm comfortable enough. I don't need to keep advancing." It is quite easy to simply stop growing as a Christian. We can quickly become stagnant in our faith. The reality is that we sometimes need someone like Paul to grab a hold of us and shake us up a bit and tell us to "grow up!"

If you are full of jealousy and strife, as the Corinthians were, you need to grow up. As Christians we must never deal with our brothers and sisters in the faith with jealousy and strife. These sins are frequently included in the New Testament lists of heinous sins, and their presence among Christians is cause for great concern.⁵ Mature Christians walking consistent with their calling are quick to exhibit humility, gentleness, patience, and to bear with one another in love (Eph. 4:2). For this to happen, our sinful nature must be put to death. This is not easy to do, and it may be that Jesus had this type of "violent" sanctification in mind when he said, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force" (Mt. 11:12). If we sincerely hope to "grow up" in Christian maturity as we lay hold of the kingdom of God, it will require violence and effort on our part as we put to death our sin, pride, jealousy, and our natural ability to create strife.

God Is the True Hero in the Church

The strife and jealousy manifest among the Corinthians was rooted in their division over which church leader to follow. Paul now asks, "**For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human?**" (v. 4). In answer to this immature division and strife, Paul now directs them away from the mere human leaders of the church and toward God. Paul reminds them that neither Paul nor Apollos are of any account, instead only God matters, only God is the true hero and champion of the Corinthian church. Paul writes:

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ 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 (1 Cor. 3:5-9).

In their immaturity, the Corinthians have radically misunderstood the nature of the church and the role of her ministers. According to the secular wisdom of Corinth, human leaders and teachers meant everything, and the Corinthian Christians have tragically adopted that same wisdom for the church. They started to think that all of their success and growth as a church depended on their leaders. They forgot that in reality it all depends on God.

Here Paul introduces agricultural imagery to his teaching. He describes the church as God's field with himself as the one who planted and Apollos as the one who watered. God, however, was the one who did the growing. Here Paul makes every effort to plainly tell the Corinthians that he should be thought no more of than a shovel in a field. And Apollos is of no more account than a watering can. In fact, we should recognize that Christ's church is full of people who, in their various giftings and roles, are nothing more than plows, shovels, watering cans, rakes, garden hoes, etc. All who strive for growth in Christ's church are merely tools in God's hands. Paul says in vs. 7 that "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything."

In reality, God has blessed his church with numerous leaders who have been given a diversity of gifts, talents, and tasks. But within that diversity each true church leader is working in unity toward the same end... growing Christ's church. The Corinthians have somehow missed the unified goal that both Paul and Apollos shared, and instead they were divided over the nature of their God-given gifts. Some thought, "Paul is a planter, I'm more comfortable with the planting types, so I'm going to only hang out with them." Others thought, "Apollos waters, I like watering, I'll associate with him." Paul and Apollos have become the heroes of the Corinthian church, and division, disunity, and a fundamental misunderstanding of the church and her leaders now reigns.

Still today Christians clamor for super-star pastors who can be the heroes of the church. Still today Christians are quick to associate themselves with mere men, and quick to divide over the God-given diversity of gifts within his church. Still today decent Christians forget that only God gives the growth, and thus only God is the hero and champion over his church. Roger Ellsworth reminds us, "The true preacher is happiest when his hearers look beyond him to the God he loves and serves."⁶ Here indeed is true evidence of Christian growth.

In John 17 we read the precious words of Jesus' high priestly prayer. This prayer is extraordinarily significant as we catch a glimpse into the close communion Jesus shares with God as the cross looms before him. In this prayer, Jesus prays for unity in the church, "that they may be one" (v. 11). This is the very thing that Paul is laboring so hard for among the Corinthians. Jesus also prays that we might know God, that we might know Christ, and see the glory of Christ (v. 24). This, of course, is the ultimate end of our growth in Christian maturity, knowing fully the glory of our triune God who is the only true hero in the story of our redemption. In John 17:3, Jesus prays, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Thus the picture in Jesus' prayer is of a unified church in which God is the hero.

May we in Christ's church today find ourselves united together as we celebrate the glory of our triune God, never drawing attention to ourselves, always pointing instead to him. He alone is the champion over his church. He alone gives growth. He alone is glorious beyond description.

¹ Paul's "fatherly" status among the Corinthians is plainly expressed by him in 1 Cor. 4:15, 'For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.'

² See 1 Cor. 2:12 for Paul's affirmation that they have indeed received God's Spirit.

³ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 125. See 1 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 4:3; Eph. 4:14; Heb. 5:13.

⁴ Calvin: *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), I, p. 66.

⁵ Rom. 1:29, 13:13; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20.

⁶ Roger Ellsworth, *Strengthening Christ's Church* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 1995), 55.