

The Imperfect Church – 6
The Growing Church
1 Corinthians 3:1-17

Introduction

Talent competitions have dominated the TV landscape for the last several years. From American Idol to America's Got Talent, Britain's Got Talent, X-Factor, and The Voice, we have been introduced to some of the most talented singers, dancers, and comedians in the world. We have also been introduced to some who are maybe not as gifted [[video clip – auditions](#)].

People couldn't get enough of these terrible performances, especially when they were first coming out. We ate up the awkwardness and felt their embarrassment. And we laughed a lot. On top of their humor, there is a great sadness about these auditions. For many of these performers, this was apparently the very first time they ever heard they were not good singers. How is that possible? Did no one love them enough to tell them the brutal truth? You cannot sing! In the name of being polite or in a false understanding of love, we can sometimes ignore what really needs to be said.

TS – The Apostle Paul does not share that issue. He cares so very much about the Church that he boldly speaks truth, even when it hurts. In so doing, he will show us what we need to care about in the church, and why it is worthy of our concern.

1 Corinthians 3:1-17 - Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. ² I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready, ³ for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren't you living like people of the world? ⁴ When one of you says, "I am a follower of Paul," and another says, "I follow Apollos," aren't you acting just like people of the world?

⁵ After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God's servants through whom you believed the Good News. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us. ⁶ I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. ⁷ It's not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What's important is that God makes the seed grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters work together with the same

purpose. And both will be rewarded for their own hard work. ⁹ For we are both God's workers. And you are God's field. You are God's building.

¹⁰ Because of God's grace to me, I have laid the foundation like an expert builder. Now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ.

¹² Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials—gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. ¹³ But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. ¹⁴ If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames.

¹⁶ Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? ¹⁷ God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

TS – In chapter 1 Paul brought up their sin of division, then went off a bit on the topic of wisdom and foolishness so they could come to some sense of humility. Now, having established those truths about the cross, true wisdom, and the Spirit, he will now circle back and come right at this issue of division again and apply all of this new information to it. In this text, Paul gives us 4 Areas we should give our Concern and Attention to in the Church:

1. THE MATURITY OF THE CHURCH

I grew up watching Saturday morning cartoons. My lazy Saturday mornings were filled with the adventures of Mighty Mouse, Voltron, Transformers, and Bugs Bunny. One of my favorite cartoon characters is Baby Huey [pic – Baby Huey]. Baby Huey had the appearance of being grown up, with the size and strength of a sumo wrestler, but had the naiveté and ignorance of a baby. This deadly combination of idiocy and strength caused much mayhem. It was all so funny.

What I did not know, and did not expect, as I grew up and started serving in churches, is that Baby Huey is a part of every church. In every church there is a demographic of people who have the appearance of maturity and the ignorance of an infant. There are always those who look mature, sometimes even sound mature, but their beliefs and their behavior betray their ignorance. No church is immune from this unfortunate reality, including Corinth. This is the demographic of people he is talking to here in these first few verses. Those who look mature, sound mature, certainly think they are mature, but who are actually everything but mature.

v. 1-3 - Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. ² I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready, ³ for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren't you living like people of the world?

Right before this in chapter 2 he introduced the difference between someone who is spiritual and someone who is unspiritual. As I said last week, he doesn't mean the same thing as we do today when he says 'spiritual.' Today a spiritual person is someone who claims to maybe believe in God, does yoga, watches Ghost Hunters, but doesn't go to church anywhere (spiritual, but not religious). Paul means it as someone who possesses the Holy Spirit. It is the Greek word *pneumatikos*, someone filled by and powered by the Spirit. Like a pneumatic drill that is powered by air, a spiritual person is powered by the Spirit.

The Corinthians are NOT that. He said "I have to speak to you like you are a baby, like someone who isn't even a believer." He had to feed them milk because they weren't ready for solid food. They were too immature to handle it. But here is Paul's area of concern, end of v. 3 – "...and you still aren't ready, for you are still controlled by your sinful nature." They aren't growing. They were immature back then, and they are still immature now. It's ok to start out ignorant, we all do. But to stay in ignorance is ignorant. They are "still controlled by their sinful nature." That phrase is a translation of a single Greek word...*sarkikos*. It comes from *sarx*, the word for flesh. The key is the "ikos" ending of the word. That implies "defined by, powered by." While they should be *pneumatIKOS*, they are *sarkIKOS*. Instead of being powered by the Spirit, they are powered by the flesh. They claim to be Christians but they aren't living like it. This is a harsh, yet healthy dose of reality for those who think they are spiritually elite. He says, "You aren't even spiritual, much less spiritually elite."

This deserves, this demands our attention. We must concern ourselves with the maturity of the church. Those who look like, sound like, and act like Christians, but who do not live like Christians are always a source of destruction in a church. So, how can you grow up in your faith? The language we use around here is Take Steps. What steps could/should you take to move on to greater levels of maturity?

2. THE LEADERS OF THE CHURCH

v. 4-6 - ⁴ When one of you says, "I am a follower of Paul," and another says, "I follow Apollos," aren't you acting just like people of the world?

⁵ After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God's servants through whom you believed the Good News. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us. ⁶ I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow.

With this, he hits them square between the eyes...You are immature, living like the world around you. The way that shows up is in division. They are playing these petty power games, and that is what unbelievers do. So how should we view the leaders in the church? Paul takes great care here to ensure people do not think too highly or too lowly of them.

It is easy to overestimate the importance of preachers and church leaders. In some churches there is an unquestioned loyalty offered to leaders, a blind following who do not see, or choose to ignore, areas of concern. When this happens, the leaders are under virtually no system of accountability. How many pastors have to fall before we realize this is a broken system? Paul tries to set them straight. Who (better translation is "what" Gk. neuter) is Paul and Apollos? Servants. Greek word is *diakonos*, where we get Deacon. It simply means minister or servant. The word was originally used to refer to table waiters at restaurants. What is Paul? A busboy doing the work the Lord instructed him to do. Planting seeds, watering them...but it is God who does the growing. God is the only one getting any credit for the work in the church or the work in your life.

It is also easy to overcompensate for this reality and underestimate the importance of preachers and church leaders. So Paul tries to set them straight. Yes, they are only servants, but servants "through whom you believed the Good News." They brought the Gospel to you, that matters. And while it is God who does the growing, without any seed planted, or any watering of it, there is nothing to grow. In v. 9 he says, "we are both God's workers." The word for workers is *synergos*, in synergy with God. Working for and with God, church leaders are used by him for good work.

I have personally experienced both sides of this reality. On the one hand I have been unfairly criticized (mostly it's fair), maligned, disrespected, called names, had things written and said about me on public forums, that people would never say about others. Me, my wife, my kids, have endured unhealthy levels of scrutiny and judgment others do not get. But the attitude is that the preacher is fair game.

Sadly, I have also had to fight against the blind loyalty stuff too. When I announced my resignation from the church we had been at for 10 years to move to Boston, 500 people left the church. They didn't want to be part of it if I wasn't part of it. That's stupid.

Even one person who would say "I follow Ian" is too many. Same with "I follow Greg/Casey/Marvin/Lloyd/Bill." If you look at the attendance history of this church, the greatest changes come in decline after every single preacher left. Friends, this should not be so. V. 7-9a - ⁷ *It's not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What's important is that God makes the seed grow.* ⁸ *The one who plants and the one who waters work together with the same purpose. And both will be rewarded for their own hard work.* ⁹ *For we are both God's workers. And you are God's field. Whose field is it?*

3. THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH

v. 10-11 - ¹⁰ *Because of God's grace to me, I have laid the foundation like an expert builder. Now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful.* ¹¹ *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ.*

As the Apostle who planted the church, he is the foundation builder. He is the one who came to them with the Gospel and got the church off the ground. He is an expert builder (lit. wise architect). Now others can build on it (we will talk about that in a minute), but no one can change the foundation. The message of the Gospel is the foundation upon which we stand. That deserves our utmost attention. Everything else is secondary. This is why churches are so different from one another. A church's governance structure, ministry model, calendar of programming...none of those are the foundation. They are merely ways to build on it.

Richard Hays - "...it is Jesus Christ *crucified* who is the foundation of the church. The superstructure of the building (the church) must conform to the pattern of that foundation. Otherwise it will be crooked and unstable. Similarly, no one can expand this foundation by saying, "Let's add on a new wing founded on wisdom," or, "Let's build a new building on the foundation of scientific knowledge," or, "Our contemporary religious experience requires us to dismantle the foundation and reconstruct it in a different way." The fixed basis for the construction of the church is the kerygma of Christ crucified.¹

¹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 54.

Paul goes on to say here that people build upon the foundation of the Gospel, and what that church builds comes under the scrutiny of judgement by God. What a church offers for programs, how it helps people grow in spiritual maturity, are all different ways to build on the Gospel. Some are better than others, but we are not talking about right and wrong. Hymns v. the new stuff, Sunday School v. small groups, how student programming is done, how missions gets funded...these are all just ways that churches can build upon the Gospel to build a church. A church is not its style of songs, how it does Christian education...a church stands on the foundation of Gospel, everything else is up for grabs and is open to be changed.

4. THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

v. 16-17 - ¹⁶ Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? ¹⁷ God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

All of you together...not all of you as individuals. Yes, those who are spiritual are those Christians who possess the Holy Spirit (God lives in you), but there is more to that. You all together are the temple of God. The holy place is no longer in Jerusalem where all the sacrifices were made. The holy place is the place where God's people come together. Why? Because the Holy Spirit lives in you (plural). This is why we must have concern about our spiritual maturity, why we have to care about who leaders are and what they do, and relentlessly remind ourselves of our sole foundation...because this is what is at stake in the church. We are the place God dwells, and we don't want to mess that up. Because there are terrible consequences for those who do.

Hays continues, "Paul has another point to make: if the church is the dwelling place of God, then God will surely deal severely with those who corrupt or damage it (3:17). Those who split the community are offending God and calling down God's judgment on their own heads. God's temple, he emphasizes, is *holy*: that is, it is set apart for the service of God. Those who turn the temple/community into a playground for their own arrogance and spiritual vanity are solemnly warned."²

This is why Paul has circled back on their sin of division. This is why he will continue talking about it through chapter 4. The church matters. Our maturity matters, we must take it seriously. Our leaders matter, we must be concerned that is being done correctly. Our foundation matters, without it we fall. Our identity matters...we are the place God dwells.

² Richard B. Hays, [First Corinthians](#), Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 58.