

To Exalt Christ
To Equip, Encourage, Exhort, Edify God's Elect

The Church's Condition – 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Paul began his letter to the church at Corinth by giving them an overview of what they have received since receiving the gospel. They have been justified and sanctified, declared and called to be holy. They have received grace given them in Christ and peace from God.

They have been enriched in their speaking and knowledge, thereby able to articulate the gospel. They are also guarded in their faith and salvation until the second coming.

Paul then addressed the divisions in the church, particularly those who followed after certain preachers and not Christ alone. He said that the message of the cross is the power of God to save. He reminded them of who they once were and that it was God who chose them.

He chose them not because of any special qualities they had, but so that their boasting would not be in themselves but in the Lord. Paul reminded them that it is because of God that they are now in Christ who has become their righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Then in chapter two Paul defined what it is to be spiritual. To be spiritual is to receive the person and power of the Holy Spirit who is from God that they/we may understand what God has freely given them/us. Those first nine verses of chapter one detail what God has given his chosen.

Now as we come to chapter three, Paul is beginning to drill down deeper as it were to the bedrock of their lives, to that of their true spiritual state. What he is pulling up however is a mixture of rock and clay. It is not the foundation upon which to build a true “*spiritual house*” to borrow

from 1 Peter 2:5. So, in verses 1-5 Paul begins to look at the church's condition or –

Problem – 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

In verses 1-2 Paul writes – *“Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly - mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.”*

The problem/condition is that they have not advanced in their spiritual life. They were stalled in their growth. What does it mean to be spiritual? We said it is to receive the Holy Spirit.

John Calvin refers to spirituality as piety. Calvin thinks of piety as the bringing together of our love for God with an understanding of his benefits. IOW it is the heart responding to what the mind comprehends. Paul outlined those benefits in 1:1-9 which helps explain why he started his letter that way. He laid that spiritual foundation.

Calvin further defines spirituality as the Holy Spirit quickening the heart of the individual so that they understand/comprehend their faith to a greater & greater degree.

The two main components of Calvin's spirituality or pietism are prayer and Biblical knowledge. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1559, Calvin said prayer is, *“the chief exercise of faith by which daily we receive God's benefits.”* IOW when we pray, we are demonstrating our faith in God to hear and respond to our words according to his will.

The second component of Calvin's spirituality is Biblical knowledge. Calvin wholeheartedly advanced the importance of expository preaching as the best way for people to increase their Biblical knowledge. Expository preaching is that by which the preacher goes book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, even word by word through the Bible.

It was said that after his return to Geneva in 1541 after being exiled to Strasbourg for three years, that on his first Sunday back in the pulpit, he picked up exactly where he had left off three years before.

In a book I am currently reading on Calvin, the authors mention that Calvin believed in brevity in both his writing and his preaching. Calvin said – *“By nature I love brevity.”* The authors also note that Calvin’s sermons lasted an hour – others preached much longer, a practice Calvin criticized. But just think what his listeners learned in just an hour with Calvin!

What Calvin advocated at Geneva, namely prayer and Biblical knowledge, were what Paul saw as lacking at Corinth, especially Biblical knowledge, meaning doctrine and theology. Paul’s letters, especially to the church at Rome, are clear examples of the depth and content of his preaching and teaching.

Through Paul, like Calvin, was the potential to learn about regeneration, coming to faith in Christ, justification, sanctification, glorification, grace, election, predestination, righteousness, the sovereignty of God, the renewing of the mind.

Paul was a walking, talking, breathing textbook of systematic theology on two legs. He had taken the skeleton, the bare bones of the gospel and had put flesh and muscle and sinew on them much like Ezekiel when commanded by God to prophesy to the dry bones in Ezekiel 37.

When Ezekiel obeyed God, tendons, flesh & skin appeared on the bones; breath was given, life resulted. As Paul said back in 1 Corinthians 1:17 – *“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.”* Paul obeyed. The gospel to put life into dead hearts, minds, souls.

So, we can understand why Paul is upset. According to Acts 18:11, *“Paul stayed a year and a half teaching them the word of God.”* After a year and a half, they are still on a diet of milk when they should have been on meat. Why was that?

In verses 3-4 Paul wrote why they are still not ready for meat. It is because – *“You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, “I follow Paul”, and another, “I follow Apollos”, are you not mere men?”*

“You are still worldly.” There is the problem. They have not really changed from what they were. This is what happens when a church/individual is influenced by the culture and society around them; influenced by what is politically correct and not what is Biblically correct. Despite the power of the Holy Spirit, it is still a tug of war for the heart, mind and soul of people.

When we think of the multi-faceted culture of Corinth, we can understand how difficult it was for people to leave practices and habits that were so ingrained in them. We live today in a similar culture. We are a post-Christian society.

Churches are closing. Student enrollment in seminaries is down in many. But while many churches are closing, a small remnant remains and are in fact growing and flourishing. Why? Those churches tend to be those that have embraced Reform and Puritan theology and doctrine. They believe, they faithfully and fully preach and teach wholeheartedly and unapologetically the whole counsel of God or the whole will and word of God.

Paul in his emotional farewell address to the elders of Ephesus where he had spent three years ministering to the church there, said in Acts 20:27 – *“For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God”* or the *“whole counsel of God”* as the ESV says. Will and counsel carry the same meaning.

What is the whole will, the whole council of God? We quoted earlier from 1 Corinthians 1:17 where Paul testified - *“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.”* That was/is the whole will, the

whole council of God. The word ‘counsel’ in the Greek means – “*volition, purpose.*” The whole council or whole purpose of what Paul preached and taught was what those first nine verses of his letter contained, namely the gospel. They were written evidence of what Paul taught & preached for one and a half years in Corinth.

Their jealousy and quarreling and following mere men such as himself and Apollos is evidence of their worldliness. They were more interested in the people than the purpose of Apollos & Paul. Paul now begins to show them that purpose.

Purpose – 1 Corinthians 3:5-9

In verse 5 Paul says – “*What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task.*”

Who are they? They are mere servants of God and Christ. What is their purpose? Their purpose is to be the means by which God brings people to faith, to believe. In Romans 10:14 Paul made this logical statement – “*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*” The preachers may be important but they are “*Only servants through whom you came to believe.*” God uses them to get the gospel out & about.

Paul explains further in verses 6-7 – “*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So, neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.*” Paul planted. He was the first to bring the gospel to Corinth. Acts 18:1-8. Apollos watered. He came to Achaia, which was a name for all of Greece, including Corinth.

Acts 18:27-28 said he “*was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.*” We have all had a Paul,

someone to bring the gospel to us and an Apollos or two who have helped build on the gospel foundation.

In verse 8 Paul continued – *“The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor.”* Preachers have one purpose, namely the faithful, consistent, uniform preaching and delivery of the gospel, the whole council of God. If the gospel is not the motive and the message, what does one preach? I don’t know.

There is a reward, but it is not a special place in heaven. It is seeing God bring someone to faith in Christ, thereby set for eternity. In verse 9 Paul wrote – *“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.”* Paul knows who he & Apollos & the Corinthians are.

They each have their place & purpose as do we. Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* wrote wisely – *“He keeps them, all their lifetime, under the discipline of the cross.”* It is the best place to be. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria.