

1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church
A Healthy View of Leadership (1 Corinthians 3:1-23)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 5, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ We're in a sermon series in the book of 1 Corinthians that we're calling "A Letter to a Troubled Church". There were a number of issues plaguing the church that Paul addresses. **The first issue – and likely the underlying issue – had to do with factions that were developing in the church of Corinth – centered around particular church leaders.** Some would say "I follow Paul," or literally "I am of Paul." While others would claim, "I am of Apollos." In other words, I belong to Apollos. I belong to his camp.
 - Paul mentioned this personality-driven way of thinking back in chapter 1:12 and then again in today's text, in chapter 3:4. *"For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos.' Are you not being merely human?"*

- ❖ Now Paul specifically mentions **Apollos** in both instances – likely for a reason. Because Apollos was a well-known figure in Corinth. He's first mentioned in Acts 18. **He's introduced as a very powerful and persuasive preacher.** We're told he was *"an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures."* He first met Paul in Ephesus, where he was instructed more accurately in the faith. Later on, Apollos wished to visit Corinth, and *"When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, ²⁸for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus."* (Acts 18:27-28)
 - So the Corinthians were familiar with Apollos and were impressed by his rhetorical skills. Arguably to a fault. Some were overly impressed by his eloquence. **They were so enamored by eloquence that they began to elevate a sermon's form over its content.** They cared less about what you said and more about how you said it.

- ❖ **Now I think it would be unfair to suggest that Apollos was a spokesman for this factional group.** I don't think he approved of what they were doing. He probably wasn't even aware. He probably already moved on from Corinth. **But nonetheless, some members were aligning themselves with Apollos and his reputation as an eloquent preacher.** And they were pitting themselves against others who felt a greater allegiance to Paul – who was apparently a less gifted and eloquent preacher – but he was instrumental in laying down, for the church, a strong theological foundation of the gospel, of Christ crucified.
 - **So there were factions in the church centered around certain personalities.** And Paul's whole point in chapters 1-4 is to make clear how inconsistent it is for a body of spiritual persons – people with the Spirit of God – to be, at the same time, a divided body of competing factions. **Those two things should *not* go together – sharing the one Spirit of God *and* dividing over many allegiances.** That's incompatible.

- ❖ And yet that's what was happening in the Corinthian church back then, and sadly, this keeps happening in the American church today. **Those who share the same faith in the same crucified Messiah – who have received the same Holy Spirit – can be so fractured and divided.** Now those divisions and factions can sometimes form around cultural markers, around racial backgrounds, around political persuasions, around generational differences, etc. Or, like the Corinthians, those factions develop around certain church leaders.

- ❖ Some Christians grow so attached to a particular leader, that, if that leader were to move on to another church, or to retire, or (God forbid) to be removed because of disqualifying sin – such Christians tend to move on, as well, to another church. **Their allegiance was always more attached to the leader than to the body of Christ.**
 - Or some believers will hop around to different churches based on whether their favorite preachers in those churches are preaching that day. And now that so many are live-streaming their services, it's easy to attach yourself to online personalities and claim that that person is your pastor. And that becomes an even bigger issue if you've grown dissatisfied with your own church's leaders.
- ❖ Suffice it to say, these divisions are as prevalent in the church today as they were in the church of Corinth. So as we walk through the text, keep in mind that the main concern are these personality-driven divisions. So let's explore what these divisions in a church reveal about us. What does it expose in us? There are three revelations – three things revealed.

Personality-Driven Divisions are Evidence of a Fleshly Immaturity

- ❖ First, it exposes immaturity. **Personality-driven divisions are evidence of a fleshly immaturity among believers.** That's Paul's point in vv1-4. He had just finished, in chapter 2, driving home the point that their divisions stem from a mistaken mindset of a two-tiered Christianity – where some would claim to possess a higher spirituality than others.
 - Paul tried to erase those lines of distinction being drawn between Christians by arguing that everyone who receives Christ crucified has received the same Spirit. So when he addresses them as “*spiritual persons*”, he simply means people with the Spirit. That's in contrast to “*natural persons*” – people without the Spirit, aka non-Christians. So it's safe to say that Paul assumes the Corinthians are Christians.
- ❖ But now he's about to rebuke their divisive behavior, and it can be confusing. At first, he sounds like he's not sure if they're Christians. Listen to v1, “*But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.*” I can't speak to you as people of the Spirit, so I'll address you as people of the flesh. **Some will take that to mean he concluded that the Corinthians are not real Christians.**
 - But even though Paul comes down pretty hard on them in the next few verses, I don't think he questions their salvation. He just addressed them as “*brothers*”, and he only uses that term to speak of brothers and sisters in Christ. And he just stated in chapter 2 that they have the Spirit in them, and that they have “*the mind of Christ.*” And even though he's saying they're acting like infants – they're infants *in Christ.*
- ❖ So Paul recognizes them as Christians, but he can't address them that way – because they're not behaving that way. They're not acting like spiritual people – like people who live by the Spirit. As a divided people, they more resemble fleshly people. People who live by the flesh because they don't have the Spirit of God in them. Non-Christians. But, even so, he's not literally calling them non-Christians.

- ❖ Just like how he's not denying they're adults and literally calling them infants. **His point is that you *are* adults – but you're acting like infants.** You *are* people of the Spirit – but you're behaving like people of the flesh. You *are* Christians – but you're acting like non-Christians. **Who you are and what you're doing are not aligned.** You're in contradiction.
- ❖ Now as we've seen, those who gravitated towards Apollos were enamored with human eloquence. They considered Paul's preaching too basic. **They didn't appreciate its cross-centered nature.** "He doesn't go deep enough. He keeps connecting everything back to Christ crucified. He's always pouring us milk. Treating us like babies."
 - Paul's response is, "Well, that's how you're behaving – like spiritual babies." Look at v2, "*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.*" **You see, for Paul, the gospel of Christ crucified is both, at the same time, milk and solid food.** It's milk for non-Christians and new Christians. They can easily handle it. They can digest it.
- ❖ **But, at the same time, the gospel is solid food for all Christians.** When you think about Christ crucified for our sins and raised for our justification – there's enough there to nourish a Christian for a lifetime. **I've heard it said that the gospel is shallow enough for a child to wade in and yet deep enough for an elephant to swim.** You will never outgrow the gospel.
 - Now that doesn't mean every sermon we preach or every lesson we teach should merely rehearse the same four gospel points over and over again. **When we preach or teach, we're going to cover more subjects than the gospel, but we should try our best to connect it all back to "Jesus Christ and him crucified."** Because who he is and what he's done for us lies at the very center of our faith.
- ❖ **But Paul's concern is that they're so stunted in their spiritual growth that they can't handle much of that.** If I try to apply the gospel in a deeper way – if I try to feed you more biblical truth – you're going to spit it up like a nursing baby. You're not ready for more.
 - **It's like trying to feed a newborn by swapping out her bottle of milk with a steaming bowl of chicken noodle soup.** Sure, it may be good for the soul and all, but newborns are going to throw it up. It's too rich for them.
- ❖ Paul is saying something similar. **You want more from my teaching. But you can't handle more.** You'll spit it up. And he points to their infighting as evidence of their immaturity. Look back at v3, "*For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?*"
 - His point is that jealousy and strife is what we would expect out of our fallen human nature. Out of our mere humanity. **Divisions and factions and party lines – that's normal, expected behavior from mere humans.**

- ❖ Think about it. **Our sinfulness is expressed, at the most fundamental level, in our self-centeredness.** Instead of submitting to God as the center of my life – as the center of the entire universe – I seek to be the center of my own universe. And I expect everyone and everything to revolve around me. That’s a way to describe our sinful, self-centeredness.
 - It’s no surprise that we run into conflict when we operate out of that mindset. **When you’re in community with mere humans, collisions are bound to occur.** It’s like bringing two planets next to each other. The moons orbiting around those two planets will inevitably collide and the planets themselves will eventually find their own orbits on a collision course. **That’s why every human community experiences strife and division – because everyone is jockeying to be in the center.**
 - **But what if both planets were orbiting the same sun – sharing the same gravitational center?** Then they would avoid collisions because neither would be competing for the center. They would all move in harmony.
- ❖ In the same way, if everyone here had the Spirit of God in us – the One who enables us to recognize “*Jesus Christ and him crucified*” as the center of everything – **then we would all end up orbiting the same Son. Christ would be our center.** If we were behaving as we should, as Christians, there would be genuine harmony between us.
 - The fact that collisions and conflicts occur – the fact that personality-driven divisions are present – that’s evidence of a fleshly immaturity among believers. We are not behaving as we ought. We’re adopting the self-centered mentality of mere humans.
- ❖ Brothers and sisters, I’m not here to question your salvation. I trust that you have the Spirit of God in you. But I do want to ask the question: **Are you walking in step with the Spirit?** Are you being led by the Spirit? Or are you regularly grieving the Spirit, quenching the Spirit, relying on yourself instead of the Spirit? **The conflicts and divisions in your own experience of Christian community reveal that you still have some growing up to do.**

Personality-Driven Divisions Demonstrate a Faulty View

- ❖ So the first thing that personality-driven divisions reveal is the spiritual immaturity among us. **Second, personality-driven divisions demonstrate a faulty view of Christian leadership.** That’s Paul’s point in vv5-15. Boasting in your association with certain leaders is contrary to the wisdom of the cross. Paul says – not only does this behavior betray a faulty view of Christ crucified – it demonstrates a faulty view of Christian leadership.
 - **He offers two analogies to teach two important truths about Christians leaders.** The first is an agricultural analogy. The second is architectural. Look at v5. He just expressed how strange it is for Christians to say that I follow Paul or I am of Apollos. “*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.*”
- ❖ **He’s saying you have too high a view of Christian leaders.** What are we? We are mere servants. So why are you claiming to be of Paul’s camp or to belong to Apollos’s camp? Neither one of us are masters to whom you belong.

- ❖ **That's the first truth to learn about Christian leaders – you can't belong to a particular leader.** As Christians, you belong to One Master, and his name is Jesus. Paul and Apollos are servants. And not just servants but farmhands. **Boasting in a church leader is like boasting in a farmhand.** It's just silly.
- ❖ And notice how Paul says that we are servants "*through whom you believed*". Not "in whom you believed". But you're behaving as if we're the ones you're to believe in. **When all along our shared goal has always been to get you to believe in Christ.**
 - **Sure, different Christian leaders have different jobs. Different callings.** In Corinth, Paul's job was to plant the church. Then he moved on. Then, Apollos showed up to water the church – to nourish it with his powerful, persuasive preaching. **But in the end, what really matters – what Paul and Apollos were both laboring for – was what only God could do.** "*God gave the growth.*" Only God can grow a church into Christlike maturity. What then is Apollos? What then is Paul?
- ❖ Do you see what he's doing? **Paul is trying to change our perspective on Christian leaders.** He's challenging our tendency to elevate preferred leaders over others. His point in v8 is that he and Apollos – and all Christian leaders by extension – "*are one*" as in one in purpose. We share the same purpose to see God's church grow and flourish.
 - To anyone claiming to belong to this or that leader – to belong in this or that camp – Paul's message is clear: **You don't belong to anyone but the Lord.** Look at v9, "*For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.*"
- ❖ The field (the church) belongs to God. The workers (the church's leaders) belong to God. The growth (the fruit of all their ministry) belongs to God. We all belong to God. So why are we competing with each other and making exclusive claims to follow this or that leader?
 - **Christian leaders are merely farmhands.** We can appreciate them. We can honor them. But let's be careful to not make too much of them. **Let's avoid the tendency to speak of prominent churches as so-and-so's church.** According to Paul, it's only right to call it God's church. A church's ministers serve as servants to the true Owner.
- ❖ **Now at the end of v9, Paul calls the church "God's building," and here he shifts to an architectural analogy.** At the same time, he shifts away from him and Apollos, and he zeroes in on those who foolishly ignore spiritual wisdom and try to build up the church with an unhealthy reliance on human wisdom and eloquence.
 - He says imagine the church as a building belonging to God. **And one day, when the construction is complete, the Owner will test the durability of the structure.** And each builder will receive his or her reward in light of whatever stands the test and lasts. That's the second truth about Christian leaders: **Because God cares about the quality of his church, he will hold its leaders accountable for how they build it.**

- ❖ Now in v10, Paul says that he's like a master builder who laid the foundation of the church. And he did it with the gospel. **He stresses in v11 that if the foundation is not the gospel of "Jesus Christ and him crucified", then you don't actually have a church.**
 - Sure, the word *church* might be in its name. But if the gospel is not underlying the very identity and activities of an assembled people, then it's not a church no matter how well you dress it up. A true church has one foundation, and his name is Jesus.

- ❖ Now after Paul planted and moved on, others arrived and have been building up the church upon its one foundation. **Here he warns those builders to take care of how they build, paying attention to the material they use.** Look at v12, "¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done."

- ❖ **Wood, hay, and straw represent the kind of worldly wisdom and eloquence that many rely on to build up the church.** It's a fool's errand. Since we were kids, stories like the *Three Little Pigs* taught us how foolish it is to build with wood, hay, or straw. And yet, we're still tempted to do it. **We still try to build a church relying on everything *but* the wisdom of God in the Word of God.**
 - We turn to corporate and marketing strategies. We rely on particular styles of music or the entertainment value of our services. We target our ministries by appealing to consumer needs. **But, in the final Day of Judgment, all of those efforts will be exposed as merely human and will not last.**

- ❖ Paul exhorts us to build a church with "*gold, silver, and precious stones.*" **By that, he means with efforts that are compatible with the church's gospel foundation.** That means if you're called to teach, you teach God's truth and exhort with God's grace. If you're called to lead, you lead like a good shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. If you're called to serve, you serve like a faithful servant who seeks to please the master and not to promote the self. That's what it looks like to build with "*gold, silver, and precious stones.*"
 - **Paul goes on to encourage our gospel efforts and to warn those who settle for combustible material.** "¹⁴If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire." **In other words, those who stick with the gospel – who center their ministry on it – will see their work survive the test.** And they'll receive their reward. But those who continue to rely on worldly wisdom will find their work consumed, and they will suffer loss.

- ❖ **Friends, there's a real possibility of spending all your time and energy pouring into a church and in the end have nothing to show for.** Church leaders *and* church members need to heed that warning. What are we relying on to build this church? What are we investing in? Is Christ crucified at the center of it all?

- ❖ **Now note at the end of v15, how Paul is quick to qualify that the “loss” he mentions is not referring to their salvation.** The distinction being made here is not between the saved and the lost – but between the saved within the church. It’s between those who have built the church well and those who have built the church poorly.
 - **But this text has often been interpreted individualistically.** Exhorting individual believers to build up their Christian lives with good works that store up treasures in heaven. And warning immature believers that all the worldly things they spend their time on will be consumed in the fire of judgement, but at least they’ll go to heaven.
 - **And that interpretation is misapplied to justify two-tiers of Christians.** Where you have spiritual Christians who represent the wise builders. And carnal Christians – whose lives are completely worldly – who have no good works to show for in the end. But they’re still assured they’ll go to heaven because of a decision they made for Christ years ago at summer camp.

Personality-Driven Divisions Reveal an Ignorance

- ❖ That particular take on this passage is too individualistic and overlooks the corporate nature of the text and the corporate nature of the church itself. **Which leads to the third thing that personality-driven divisions reveal – they reveal an ignorance of the true nature of the church and its inheritance.** This is Paul’s point in vv16-23.
 - Listen to vv16-17. *“¹⁶Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”*
- ❖ **Here Paul reveals that, when he spoke of the church being a building, all along he had the temple in mind.** The church is not just any building. We are the temple of God. He’ll return to this analogy later in chapter 6 and apply it more individually, speaking of your body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19). But here he is addressing the entire church.
 - All the *yous* in vv16-17 are second person, plural pronouns. As Texans we would translate this as, *“Don’t you know that y’all are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in y’all?”* That captures it better than the ESV. **Paul’s emphasis is on the fact that God dwells in us corporately in a unique way not experienced individually.**
- ❖ And by describing them as *“God’s temple,”* that would’ve hit home even harder for the Corinthians because they were living in a city full of temples dedicated to pagan gods and goddesses. **By describing them as the true temple of God – they have to confront the holiness of their church or the lack thereof.**
 - If they’re building up the church with worldly means and worldly methods, then how is it going to stand apart? How will it be holy? **If y’all’s church, at its core, resembles any other pagan temple in the city, then y’all will have essentially destroyed y’all’s church.** Because it’s no longer holy and distinct as a church – built on the foundation of *“Jesus Christ and him crucified.”*

- ❖ That's Paul's warning, and then in vv18-20, he sums up the previous argument that he's been making in chapters 1-2. What the Corinthians consider wisdom is merely a wisdom of this age (of this world) and it's considered folly in the eyes of the One True and Wise God.
 - He starts off v18 by saying, "*Let no one deceive himself.*" **He means we would be deceiving ourselves if we try to build up the church using worldly wisdom.** In the world's eyes, our church might look successful. But on the final day, it will be revealed that all of our efforts to build up the church were actually tearing it down.

- ❖ But instead of ending his argument with a warning, as is often the case, Paul concludes with an encouragement. Listen to vv21-23, "²¹*So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,* ²²*whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours (y'all's),* ²³*and you (y'all) are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*"
 - His point is that we should stop boasting in Christian leaders, since we don't belong to any of them. **In fact, your view of your own inheritance as a church founded in Christ is far too narrow.** You're content to claim Paul as yours or Apollos as yours. But in reality, Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and all other Christian leaders – all belong to you! As well as all things in the world, in life and death, in the present and future – all things are yours! **And that's because you belong to Christ and Christ is of God – so in Christ all things in God's universe are yours!**

- ❖ **Church, do you realize what a rich inheritance we have in Christ?** Why would we quarrel? Why would we divide? Do you see fish fighting for more water? Penguins quarreling over more ice? Birds jostling for more space in the sky? That would makes no sense. All are theirs. In the same way, all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.