

Challenges Christians Face

Sectarianism Is Carnal

1 Corinthians 3:1-4

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March 6, 2011

Sectarianism Is Carnal

Scripture

The past two Sundays we had a Missions Conference and an Ordination and Installation Service for Officers. Today we continue our study in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the worldly practice of divisiveness. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Sectarianism Is Carnal."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 3:1-4:

¹ But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ 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? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? (1 Corinthians 3:1-4)

Introduction

Pastor, professor, and author Kenneth L. Chafin told the following story in his commentary on 1 Corinthians:

Over lunch, several friends were discussing a church we all knew about which was so wracked with internal strife that it had become common knowledge in the community. Some members, who had no stomach for a fight, were drifting into neighboring churches. Those who remained were being pushed by the opposing groups to take sides, and the affair was becoming very unpleasant. The issue that had precipitated such a furor was the changing of the job description of the organist, who had been there for years and had built a small empire in her area of work. She had developed great skill in using a loyal following as a power base for budget,

program, and calendar advantages. So when a special lay committee brought a report to the congregation suggesting a slight change in her duties, she took it as a personal rebuke and declared war. Since none of us were having to deal with the situation, most of us agreed with the one who said, “That doesn’t sound like a big enough problem to split a church.” Then one of the group reminded us of a truth that is too easily forgotten: “Any problem that has to be dealt with by people who are spiritually immature can divide a church, no matter how small it may appear.”¹

That last statement is a remarkably insightful statement. As I reflect back on my past twenty-five years of pastoral ministry I think I can safely say that every instance of division has been caused by people who were spiritually immature. I have seen divisions over who should teach a Sunday school class, or even over calling a particular doctrinal error an “error”! On the other hand, I have also seen churches face with great spiritual maturity radical changes in the community, new and different leadership, or every kind of hardship grow stronger and more united.

In today’s lesson the apostle Paul ties the worldly practice of divisiveness that is dividing the church to the failure of the members to grow up spiritually.

Review

Before we study today’s lesson, let’s briefly review what we have covered so far in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*.

After the introductory salutation (1:1-3) and thanksgiving (1:4-9) of the letter, Paul immediately addressed the issue of divisions in the church in Corinth (1:10-17). Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to heal the divisions in the church because they are contrary to the unity that exists in Christ’s body.

The reason for the division in the church at Corinth was due to a misunderstanding of human wisdom versus the wisdom from

¹ Kenneth L. Chafin and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 30, *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 30: 1, 2 Corinthians*, The Preacher's Commentary series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1985), 47.

the Spirit.

Paul came down hard on human wisdom because he argued against a Corinthian attitude toward wisdom that placed him and his gospel in a less than favorable light. Human wisdom about salvation that is purely philosophical, rhetorical, and speculative is wrong. Instead, there is a wisdom about salvation that has been revealed by God that is right.

The radical contrast that Paul set up between human wisdom and the message of the gospel could have led to the misconception that the Christian faith is foolishness. So, Paul carefully explained that the gospel is a very special kind of wisdom that can be discerned only by those who are spiritually mature.

Having shown that the gospel of Christ opposed the arrogant wisdom of this age, Paul warned against the celebrities whom worldly wisdom had created in Corinth. And so the apostle Paul pointed out that the Corinthian believers did not behave like people taught by the Holy Spirit. Although they were believers, they acted like unbelievers.

Lesson

Similarly, in today's lesson we are urged to behave like people taught by the Holy Spirit and not act like unbelievers.

Let's use the following outline for today's lesson:

1. Divisions Demonstrate Spiritual Immaturity (3:1-2)
2. Divisions Cause Believers to Act Like Unbelievers (3:3-4)

I. Divisions Demonstrate Spiritual Immaturity (3:1-2)

First, divisions demonstrate spiritual immaturity.

Paul begins this portion of his letter by saying, "**But I, brothers**" (3:1a). I want you to notice three things about this.

First, when he calls them **brothers** he is also including the women in the congregation. Paul uses the term **brothers** to refer to

both men and women.

Second, when he calls them **brothers** Paul wants them to be sure that he is addressing them as spiritual family members. It is a term of love and respect. He is about to rebuke them, but before he does so he wants them to know that he sees them as part of the same spiritual family.

And third, when he calls them **brothers** Paul sees them as Christians. This is essentially the same point as the previous point. However, I want to be clear that Paul sees the Corinthians as Christians. And this is so not only because he calls them **brothers** but also because he says at the end of verse 1 that they are “infants in Christ.” Admittedly, they are infants. But my point here is that they are *in Christ*. That is a description that Paul uses only of Christians.

So, Paul is addressing Christian men and women in Corinth. And he says to them, “But I, brothers, **could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ**” (3:1).

Now Paul says that he could not address these Christians **as spiritual people**. What does Paul mean by that?

The New Testament uses the word **spiritual** in a number of ways. In a neutral sense it simply means the realm of spiritual things, in contrast to the realm of the physical.

When applied to people, however, it is used of their relationship to God in one of two ways: *positionally* or *practically*.

Unbelievers are totally unspiritual in both senses. They possess neither a new spirit nor the Holy Spirit. Their position is natural and their practice is natural.

Believers, on the other hand, are totally spiritual in the *positional* sense, because they have been given a new inner being that loves God and is indwelt by his Holy Spirit. But *practically*, believers can also be unspiritual.

In 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 Paul contrasts believers and unbelievers, and his use of “spiritual” in that context refers, therefore, to *positional* spirituality. The “natural person” (2:14) is unsaved; the

“spiritual person” (2:15) is saved. In the *positional* sense, there is no such thing as an unspiritual Christian or a partially spiritual Christian. In this sense every believer is equal. This **spiritual** is a synonym for possessing the life of God in the soul, or as we saw in 1 Corinthians 2:16, having the mind of Christ.

A *positionally* spiritual person is one with a new heart, indwelt by and controlled by the Holy Spirit. As Paul said in Romans 8:9, “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (cf. v. 14). When we trust in Jesus Christ, his Spirit takes charge of our lives and remains in charge until we die. He will control us to his own ultimate ends, whether we submit or not. “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Our resistance and disobedience can cause many unnecessary detours, delays, and heartaches, but he *will* accomplish his work in us because “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Practically, however, believers may be anything but spiritual. Such were the Corinthian Christians. Paul addressed them as brothers. But he made it clear that he had to speak to them on the lowest possible spiritual level. He had to speak to them as if they were **people of the flesh**.

People of the flesh (*sarkinos*) is literally “fleshy ones.” In this context it refers to man’s fallen humanness, his Adamic self—his bodily desires that manifest rebelliousness toward God, his glorying in himself, and his proneness to sin. The flesh is not eradicated when we are saved. It no longer can ultimately dominate or destroy us, but it can still greatly influence us. That is why we yearn for the redemption of the body (Romans 8:23). Glorification, in one sense, will be less of a change than justification. Justification was transformation of the inner being; glorification is the elimination of the outer being, which bears the curse.

So a Christian is not characterized by sin; it no longer

represents his basic nature. But he is still able to sin, and his sin is just as sinful as the sin of an unbeliever. Sin is sin. When a Christian sins, he is being practically unspiritual, living on the same practical level as an unbeliever. Consequently Paul is compelled to speak to the Corinthian believers much as if they were unbelievers.

Perhaps somewhat to soften the rebuke, he also compares them to **infants in Christ**. It was far from a compliment, but it did recognize that they truly belonged to Christ.

The Corinthian believers were spiritually ignorant. Paul had ministered to them for eighteen months, and after that they were pastored by the highly-gifted Apollos. Some of them were acquainted with Peter and others apparently had even heard Jesus preach (1:12). Like the “child” of Hebrews 5:13, they had no excuse for not being mature. Yet they were exactly the opposite. They were not infants because they were newly redeemed, but because they were inexcusably immature.²

So, does Paul have in mind the image of children who need to grow, or that of infantile adults who need to adjust their attitudes?

The vast majority of commentators perceive the issue as a call to maturity and to progress in the Christian life. There is certainly something of a call to progress in the Christian life in Paul’s exhortation. However, as one commentator points out that in our passage the main contrast is not between infants and mature adults but rather between people who are infantile and people who are under the control of the Spirit.³

The point is that any Christian can be a person of the flesh, worldly, or carnal at any point in his Christian walk. When I act like a self-centered child, I am carnal at that point. Paul himself said that he was carnal in Romans 7:14, “For we know that the law is spiritual, *but I am carnal*, sold under sin” (NKJV).

Paul then said to the Corinthians, **“I fed you with milk, not**

² John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 70-71.

³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 289-90.

solid food, for you were not ready for it” (3:2a). Just as newborn infants cannot eat solid food, the Corinthians were unable to eat the solid food of Christian teaching.

Now I want to be clear that Paul is not talking about two kinds of spiritual diet here. He is not talking about a diet for new Christians and a different diet for mature believers. Rather, as one commentator puts it, the contrast is “not between two quite different diets” in the sense of elementary and advanced Christian doctrine (as in Hebrews 5:11-14) but between “the true food of the Gospel. . . (whether milk or meat) and the synthetic substitutes which the Corinthians have preferred.”⁴

Commentator Charles Hodge points out that the difference between milk and solid food is in the form of instruction rather than in the things taught. The same truth in one form is milk, in another form solid food. “Christ,” says Calvin, “is milk for babes, and strong meat for men.”⁵

Pastor John MacArthur says that there is no difference at all between the truths of a spiritual milk diet and a spiritual solid food diet, except in detail and depth. All doctrine may have both milk and meat elements. It is not that we are to be continually learning new doctrines in order to grow, but that we are to be learning more about the doctrines we have known for years. A new Christian might explain the atonement, for example, as, “Christ died for my sins.” A long-time student of the Word, on the other hand, would go into such things as regeneration, justification, substitution, and propitiation. One explanation would not be truer than the other; but the first would be **milk** and the second, **solid food**.

For a Christian preacher or teacher to give only milk week after week, year after year, is a crime against the Word of God and the Holy Spirit! It cannot be done without neglecting much of the Word and without neglecting the leading and empowering of the

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 291.

⁵ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 49.

Holy Spirit, the supreme Teacher and Illuminator. It is also a terrible disservice to those who hear, whether or not they are satisfied with having only milk. The appetite must be created.⁶

Further Paul said, “**And even now you are not yet ready**” (3:2b). It seems that the reason they were **not yet ready** for solid food is because there were divisions among them. They were still spiritually immature and there were still divisions.

II. Divisions Cause Believers to Act Like Unbelievers (3:3-4)

And second, divisions cause believers to act like unbelievers.

Paul said that the Christians in Corinth were acting like unbelievers. He said in verse 3, “. . . **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?**”

When a Christian acts in an infantile way, he is essentially self-centered. A baby is self-centered. A baby cannot take care of itself and it is entirely focused on itself and its own needs.

A sign of maturity is when a child starts to share and think of others. A sign of growth is when a child becomes more focused on serving the needs of others rather than his own needs.

Jealousy is “a particularly strong feeling of resentment . . . against someone.”⁷ John MacArthur says that **jealousy** “is a severe form of selfishness, begrudging someone else what we wish were ours.”⁸ In addition to jealousy there is also **strife**, which is “conflict resulting from rivalry and discord.”⁹

When there is **jealousy** and **strife** it almost always leads to division and divisiveness. Divisions cause believers to act like unbelievers. That is why Paul chastised the Corinthians for **behaving in only a human way**.

⁶ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 71-72.

⁷ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996), 759.

⁸ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 73.

⁹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996), 494.

Divisions only occur where there is selfishness and self-centeredness. There are times when even Christians who have been believers for a long time act in fleshly, worldly, and carnal ways. They begin to act selfishly and start siding with others in the church who agree with them. Factions cannot help but result when there is **jealousy** and **strife**, or any other form of carnality. When Christians in a congregation develop loyalties around certain individuals, it is a sure symptom of spiritual immaturity and trouble.

That is what happened at Corinth. That is why Paul said, **“For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human?”** (3:4). It was sinful for factions to develop around **Paul** and **Apollos**.

And it is just as sinful today to develop factions around certain individuals in the church today.

Conclusion

We are urged to behave like people taught by the Holy Spirit and not act like unbelievers. Divisions in the church are really contrary to the gospel. We must resolve sinful divisions in the church.

By way of application, let me encourage you to examine your life this morning. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I detect selfishness in my life?
- Is there another Christian in our fellowship with whom I am in conflict?
- Why am I in conflict with that person?
- Is it because I am not getting my way?
- Or is it because the gospel and truth are at stake?

I am sure that you can add more questions to the list. The point is that you should examine yourself. And then, if you find that you are concerned about the possibility of selfishness, worldliness, or carnality in your life, then you can do the following:

- Ask God to show you whether or not there is sin in your life.

- If there is sin in your life, then confess it to God.
- If your sin has caused jealousy and strife, then go to the individual/s concerned and ask for forgiveness.
- And then look to God's Word to find gospel promises that will help you when you struggle with the same issue again.

Paul calls us to behave like people taught by the Holy Spirit and not act like unbelievers. May God help us always to do so. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Challenges Christians Face

PRAAYER:

Our Father, we are so prone to selfishness and sinful behavior. We struggle with the flesh. Indeed, we will struggle with the flesh until we meet you face to face.

Help us to behave like people taught by the Holy Spirit and not act like unbelievers. If there are any persons against whom we have sinned, enable us to be quick to repent and seek forgiveness.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go from here today and live like people who are taught by the Holy Spirit and do not act like unbelievers.