

A good title for 1 Corinthians 3 might be, “The Marring of the Church.”

After pointing out the folly of human wisdom and the glory of divine wisdom, Paul now rebukes the Corinthians for adopting the former. He brings a strong rebuke against those in the church who were behaving immaturely for this was both unbecoming and divisive. Further, Paul provides a strong warning about the danger of a wasted life (v. 15) as well as a stern warning of judgement from God upon those who would harm his church (v. 17). If we mar God’s body, we will experience chastening consequences. One might even experience eternal consequences for doing so.

Fundamentally, as we have seen, Paul rebukes them for not being more biblically mature in their assessment of men. They manifested immaturity by their adherence to the messengers rather than to the message (and the Master, who is the content of the message).

Not only does this display foolishness, it can also be quite dangerous. If our loyalties to Christ, to his gospel, and to his church, are determined by eloquence and worldly applause, then our loyalty is actually non-existent at worst, or weak and confused at best. We certainly will not be growing in Christ. In other words, spiritual maturity has everything to do with how we respond to the cross of Christ. And the cross of Christ has everything to do with our relationships with one another. It has everything to do with how invested we are in the local church. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 3.

In the process of admonishing them, Paul teaches us the significance of man and the power of God in building his church. He also teaches us the importance of every church member being involved in the building of the church. We will be judged according to our participation. But this in turn requires an ongoing maturation. Biblical maturation and body-building participation go hand in hand.

TO THINK ABOUT

Before getting into the text, how do we often define spiritual maturity? How does the Bible define it? See John 15:1–7 with Galatians 5:22–23. How does Ephesians 4:11–16 portray spiritual maturity?

It is a worthwhile observation that Paul first laid out the Scriptural teaching concerning the wisdom of God versus the wisdom of man before directly assailing the sin in the Corinthian church. This is the biblical pattern: show what is right, then point out what is not right; exposition, then application. For our study purposes, we will divide chapter 3 in the following way:

1. The Problem of Carnality (3:1-4)
2. The Process of Conversion (3:5–7)
3. The Program of Construction (3:8–15)
4. The Protection of the Church (3:16–17)
5. The Privilege of the Christian (3:18–23)

The Problem of Carnality (vv. 1–4)

The Definition of Carnality (vv. 1–2)

“spiritual” —cf. chapter 2—those who have the God-given ability to discern divine revelation.

“carnal”—fleshly, pertaining to the material, natural; cf. Romans 7:14; 15:27; 1 Corinthians 9:11; 2 Corinthians 11:12—“fleshly.”

“babes”—lit. “not speaking”; infants, simple-minded; cf. 13:11—“child” (Ephesians 4:14; Hebrews 5:13).

Conclusion: The Corinthians were behaving, in this area, as children. They were failing to comprehend basic biblical revelation. Paul clearly approached them as believers (“in Christ”) yet he says that they are behaving as those who cannot adequately discern the truth. What Paul identifies here is not a third category of person (natural, spiritual, carnal). He is simply pointing out that they are not thinking biblically. This is a far cry from the modern teaching of “the carnal Christian.”

TO THINK ABOUT

Some evangelicals argue that there are three types of people: the natural man, the spiritual man and the carnal man. They argue that the latter two cover two kinds of Christians. Is this what Paul is saying? Is Paul teaching that some Christians are completely dominated by the flesh or is he using “carnal” in another sense? How does Romans 8:5–9 speak to this? Look at Hebrews 5:12–14 and consider the matter of spiritual maturation. What is required for it? What does it result in? What do you think that Paul means by “milk” and “solid food”? That is, are there certain doctrines that only mature Christians can digest? Is he referring to their being evangelised by the gospel as “milk” and discipleship as “solid food”? Why or why not? How does the context speak to this?

The Description of Carnality (vv. 3–4)

Verse 3

“For” — “Here is proof of your carnality.”

“envy, strife and divisions” — Such indeed are characteristic of the old/natural man rather than like the new man created in Christ Jesus (see Ephesians 4:17ff).

Paul is saying that they are behaving like those who are controlled by the flesh, rather than by the Spirit.

TO THINK ABOUT

Why is harmony in a church evidence of spiritual maturity? What does a firm grasp of doctrine have to do with spiritual maturity? Is it one and the same thing? How does a deep love for the gospel of Christ promote the development of spiritual maturity in the church?

Verse 4

“Are you not carnal?” — “Are you not behaving in a non-discerning way? Are you not displaying worldly wisdom?”

TO THINK ABOUT

How does our so-called “celebrity Christianity” manifest a “carnal approach” to the gospel? What can we learn from this passage about sectarianism in the wider church? For example, the divisions between “Calvinists” and “non-Calvinists”; divisions between “cessationists” and “continuationists”; the divisions between “Baptists” and “paedobaptists.” Is it wrong to divide over these distinctives? When is it right to lay these differences aside? When would it be unwise? Finally, considering the previous question, are we “carnal” because we do not partner with Roman Catholics? Put another way, was the Reformation a carnal movement? Was it necessary?