

## “Differences + Humility = Unity”

### 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth began with a commendation in 1:4,

*<sup>4</sup> I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup> For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— <sup>6</sup> because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. <sup>7</sup> Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful*

But that lead quickly to the main point of the letter; their spiritual immaturity due to division over their preferred bible teacher. Some liked Peter, while others preferred Apollos. some Paul and others only listened to Jesus. The underlying factor behind their preferences was they came from a cultural background of praising eloquence, style, and intellectualism. Peter was an uneducated fisherman, Paul a religious Pharisee and Apollos a Greek background believer, probably with a style many applauded.

In Ch. 2 Paul reminded them what true wisdom is; knowing God by faith through Jesus Christ. That makes you wise in God’s eyes but maybe not the worlds. These he called spiritual because they have the Holy Spirit and are able to understand God’s truths. The ‘natural’ person does not have the Spirit because he/she sees the cross as foolishness. We, however, Paul finishes the chapter saying, ‘We have the mind of Christ’. We can understand the world, God, Jesus, God’s plan and the future that natural people cannot. Again, ignore the chapter division. Remember Paul hasn’t changed the subject.

“And I” a Greek word that some translations leave out which is a specific word that joins what was just said with what he’s going to say. Essentially we should read it like this

But we have the mind of Christ. *And yet*

**3:1** Brothers (and sisters), I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ.

Now, he’s talking to believers, some of whom are not acting spiritual. They accepted Christ. They have the Spirit because he has seen some change in their life; evidence of the Spirit’s fruit, but some were not using Christ’s mind about all things. They were still letting their sinful nature dictate their thoughts and actions, especially with regard to their preferences for others.

Sadly, we can all use our preferences to become measuring sticks of our maturity. Our diversity just means we’re different, that’s all. If we truly have the mind of Christ and see clearly how different we are, in actuality

## **Preferences Should Unite Us Because We See God’s Creativity (3:1-4)**

It’s spring and some of you will start planting flowers. Isn’t it amazing how intricate and diverse flowers and plants are? And that’s just here in Canada. Go to a different climate and see the diversity and details there. It’s the same with animal life. I always chuckle when I hear scientists have

discovered a new species of fish that only live in the deepest and darkest part of the ocean. God made that a long time ago. And we've only now figured out how to get down that far.

What about people? Are we not diverse? Are we not fearfully and wonderfully made?

*Ps. 139:13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

*<sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

*<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.*

*<sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*

If you believe that about you and I believe that about me, then we must believe that about each other and all people. The Corinthians weren't getting that. They did not appreciate each other. They were using their preferences and God's differences as to how He made them, to compare themselves to others and use those as signs of spiritual maturity when in fact ...

### ***They may reveal our spiritual immaturity (vv.1-2)***

*Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.*

What does he mean by "still"? This was written about 3 years after Paul was there in Acts 18. The reason we don't give babies a sandwich or a steak is because they can't handle it yet. They have to master basics first. They don't have teeth yet. Their bodies haven't developed to digest these things yet. They will gradually.

It's the same principle as spiritual maturity. How can you make God-honouring biblical decisions when you don't know the Bible very well? How do you know how to treat your spouse and children if you don't know what God says about these things? How can you treat others with kindness when you've lived 20, 30, 40 years of worldly harshness? It takes time to change the way we think before we can change the way we speak and act.

Paul is saying here is, you guys have not developed in your biblical understanding about your fellow Christians, that each one is a recipient of grace. That each one is uniquely different, created by God to complement you and to sharpen you. Whatever area you and I need to work on and grow in, God will bring people and situations in our lives that He'll use to work on our anger, our harshness and our impatience. He'll show us our weaknesses through other's strengths and show us our strengths through other's weaknesses. Yours and my preferences don't make us superior to anyone; they just show us we're different; not better. You were made by the grace of God and so was every other person. Every believer was saved by grace and so were you. Stop dividing over preferences Paul was saying.

This must have been very frustrating to Paul to see these believers not growing spiritually, using their preferences to make them feel superior to others when it actually was showing

### ***How worldly-minded they still were (vv.3-4)***

*You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?*

Let's be clear, Paul was telling believers they were carnal, worldly-minded. Yes, they had accepted Christ. Yes, they had shown evidence of the Spirit's work in their life but they were still thinking like the world more than like Jesus. And so there was quarreling and jealousy. In Gal. 5 Paul will list the fruit of the Spirit, but prior to that he lists the fruit of the flesh:

*<sup>16</sup> So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. <sup>17</sup> For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.*

*<sup>19</sup> The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; <sup>20</sup> idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions <sup>21</sup> and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

*<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

Acts of the sinful nature are obvious. Don't live like the world, live by the Spirit who now dwells in you by God's grace and as we renew our minds, the evidence will come. We will respond more with joy, love and kindness when mistreated. We will model peace, patience and self-control when tested. We will be faithful to God do good and become gentler like Jesus. That's who we're supposed to be conformed to.

*<sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

So, what did these Corinthians need to do? What should we be doing to and for one another as believers in Christ? Paul challenges us all to

## **Let's Glorify God in our Diversity** **(3:5-9)**

What specific steps do we need to take when we're tempted to use our preferences as a way to show we're better than others? Remind ourselves why we're here

### ***We're here to serve others, not ourselves (v.5, 22-23)***

*<sup>5</sup> 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.*

Why does Paul focus on him and Apollos? Paul planted the church; Apollos came along afterwards to help the church grow. They were two differently gifted bible teachers/leaders used by God to help the church receive what it needed when it needed it. They were servants sent by God to help the Corinthians grow, not divide over. Neither was better than the other; just different. They had different gifts, different styles, different ways of doing ministry, but they were both about serving the Corinthians.

By the way, the worldly-minded Greek culturally influenced-not-maturing believer cringed when Paul used the word 'servant'. It's the Greek word diakonos that we get deacon from, but it was a slave word. God took a slavery term and elevated it to communicate His servants. Same with doulos. These people prided themselves on social status. Paul says, we are grace recipients, servants of

God. We're here to lift you up and do what's necessary to see you thrive in Christ. Our gifts and differences and preferences are meant to be used to serve others, not lift yourself.

In vv.22-23 – still in the context of this argument – Paul will summarize their ministry by saying,

*<sup>21</sup> So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, <sup>23</sup> and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.*

We have everything. We all belong to God. We are all in Christ and Christ is in us. Serve one another to the glory of God.

*Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. <sup>6</sup> I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. <sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.*

Servants perform their tasks to the benefit of others. Believers serve God, doing His work but

### ***We are totally reliant on God for the results (vv.6-7)***

Jesus said in John 15:5

*<sup>5</sup> "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man [or woman] remains in me and I in [them], [you] will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

God's work is Spirit work. When we use our gifts in humble service to each other for God, people will get saved and mature in Christ. Paul uses the agricultural metaphor because Jesus did too. If the seed is the truth of God's Word according to Jesus in Matt. 13, the power is in the seed not in the planter or the waterer. None of us can force the seed to grow. We are totally reliant on God just as a farmer is totally reliant on God for the seed he has sown to produce. We pray, we obey, we share, teach, serve but the results are up to God. We are the servants; He is Lord. The Corinthians needed to show they were maturing by understanding this. Join Paul and Apollos and Peter in Jesus' work together and watch God do amazing things that we could plan nor orchestrate. And be grateful for whatever He does.

It would seem from the rest of Ch. 3 that the Corinthians were doing ministry for gain somehow. We're not sure why, exactly. But that too is worldliness creeping in to our ministries. It's not about us nor is it for us. But that doesn't mean there aren't rewards. There will be but leave that with God;

### ***God will reward us fairly (v.8)***

*<sup>8</sup> The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor*

Paul will expand on this in vv.10-23 so we'll cover this more next week. But for now, let's just focus on the fact that we all have the same purpose to build up Jesus' church as we labour. Ministry is work. Everything we do here and for each other and our communities takes work and takes workers. We need planters and waterers all the time in so many different ways. But the reason we all do this together is because

### ***We all belong to God (v.9)***

*For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.*

And each time God is emphatic. Three times Paul reminds us 'we are God's workers, God's field, God's building'. In Eph. 2:19 Paul says

*<sup>19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Our theme this year is "in Christ". We are all in Christ and in all of us Christ dwells if we have accepted Him as our Saviour. The Corinthians had forgotten this and so do we sometimes. When we try to build ourselves up because we think our preferences make us better than others, we actually undermine the work God is doing. We are doing demo work not restoration work. Paul really likes using the word 'building'. In 2:20 we are 'built' on the foundation of Jesus [passive tense means God did this not us], we are part of a whole building to become a holy house, and we are being built together [presently] to become [future] our future forever home. All plurals.

Paul had to destroy the singular, selfish mindset of believers in Corinth who looked at life from their perspective and not God's. The worldly, singular mindset divides and destroys. The spiritual, community mindset builds up. If we're honest this morning, which one are we?