

The unfolding of your words gives light.

## The Temple of God

### An Exposition of 1 Corinthians

<sup>3:1</sup>And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ<sup>a</sup>. <sup>2</sup>I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able<sup>b</sup>, <sup>3</sup>for you are still fleshly<sup>c</sup>. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men<sup>d</sup>? <sup>4</sup>For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not *mere men*<sup>a</sup>?

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<sup>a</sup> **3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.** Paul changed the way he spoke depending on the way he perceived the spiritual maturity level of his students. He had to teach what they could handle. These were not unbelievers, but they were behaving like babies. There is a distinction between “men of flesh” and the “natural man” of chapter two. The recipients of this letter are “in Christ.” There are no “natural” men who are in Christ.

<sup>b</sup> **3:2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able.** Nursing is the best nutrition available for a baby, but eventually you need to graduate the child to solid food. Paul did not give examples of what he meant by milk and solid food, but another New Testament author uses the same word picture to help us understand:

Concerning him [Melchizedek] we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Hebrews 5:11-14

Based on the Hebrews text, the difference between a spiritual diet of “milk” and “solid food” has to involve the word of God and how we handle it. It involves:

- An appetite for truth
- A cognitive understanding of truth
- An experiential understanding of truth
- An ability to teach the truth
- A discernment of truth and error

<sup>c</sup> **3:3 for you are still fleshly.** This tells us that it is possible for a genuine Christian to be fleshly. It does not tell us that it is possible for a genuine Christian to live a life that is primarily characterized by a fleshly (carnal) lifestyle. This does not identify three classes of people (natural, carnal, spiritual). It acknowledges that sometimes believers act like babies.

<sup>d</sup> **3:3 For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?** The idea of being a “mere” man does not suggest that believers must be achievers. It is only natural to have jealousy and strife. The apostle scolds these people for living like everyone else when God has provided away to put away the old life. Jealousy and strife are both listed as works of the flesh in Galatians 5. The growth God alone can bring make someone who walks just like everyone else begin to walk like the Savior. James says that jealousy is part of earthly “wisdom”:

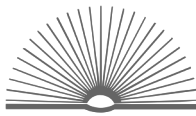
But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. James 3:14-16

The Epistle of 1 Corinthians  
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<sup>5</sup>What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one<sup>b</sup>. <sup>6</sup>I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth<sup>c</sup>. <sup>7</sup>So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth<sup>d</sup>. <sup>8</sup>Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor<sup>e</sup>. <sup>9</sup>For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building<sup>a,b</sup>.

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It will become clear (1 Corinthians 4:6) that Paul and Apollos were not at the center of the problems at Corinth. Immature believers are at the same time fiercely loyal and vehemently critical. If you are asking "Could this be me?" you are on the right track, for maturing believers take responsibility for their sins. Here are the marks of this kind of immaturity:

- They crave praise for what they do.
- They want to be on the team that looks the best even if it isn't the best.
- They value the way others perceive them more than they value what God sees in their hearts.
- They are quick to offense and anger, though not always externally.
- They talk about others a lot.

One way to know someone is a spiritual infant is that he does not play well with others. In a group of children you can usually tell that there is often one who seems to be at the center of controversy. That one is either an innocent victim or a sly perpetrator. So it is in the church.

Christian patience or graciousness is not a sign of weakness or compromise but of maturity. You do not have to react to everything that rubs you the wrong way.

<sup>a</sup> 3:4 **For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men?** This takes us back to Paul's first scolding in chapter one. You know people by their fruit.

<sup>b</sup> 3:5 **What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.** The word for servants is not commonly translated this way. It could read *deacons* or even *tablewaiters*. The focus of the church controversy was not over men who held the office of deacon but men who were servants. The tablewaiter may make your dining experience pleasurable but his job is only to serve what someone else has prepared. *Don't take up sides with the waiters, Paul says.*

One measurable evidence that someone is leaving infancy and going on to maturity is the ability to get excited about what God is going to give you even when the one delivering the meal isn't your favorite.

<sup>c</sup> 3:6 **I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.** This agricultural theme was a favorite for our Lord. Few other things illustrate the power of God working in unseen ways to bring fruit from little seeds. This does not discount the importance of workers but it does show that the very best work does not actually make seeds germinate and grow. The farmer is dependent.

You see how maturity makes you less man-focused and more God-focused. Paul uses different metaphors with good reason: They each point back to the message that God is the Chief Actor and that the rest of us are servants privileged to work for Him.

<sup>d</sup> 3:7 **So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.** Notice that your focus will increasingly be God-centered the more you grow. Jesus taught His disciples (using another agricultural illustration of a grape vine, John 15:5) that apart from Him they could do nothing. Mature congregations of believers do not rejoice in methods or leaders because they know that only God can bring a spiritual harvest.

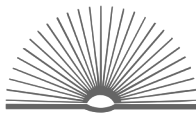
<sup>e</sup> 3:8 **Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.** This does not make God dependent on man, but it does show that

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God has chosen to use men to do His work in His harvest field. It also shows that God recognizes individual laborers. He sees how hard you work in His field. It is not the task of your leaders to make you grow but it is their responsibility to labor to make conditions for growth possible.

<sup>a</sup> 3:9 **For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.** *God's* is the key word here. It is spoken three times, demonstrating His ownership of the work. "We" refers to the church leaders, Paul and Apollos included. They worked hard with the people God sent them to serve.

Paul's two metaphors for the church (a field and a building) both communicate something that takes a lot of work and shows progress. It is not as noticeable that farmers or builders are working hard as that something big is happening while they work. So you delight that God has made you part of His work.

<sup>b</sup> 3:1-9 Many Christians can remember church fights and splits. Many Christians know people who became offended and either left a church or just stayed and complained. You may even have been the one stirring up those controversies. There is hope if you are in Christ—even if you are still acting like a baby.

What does the fruit of your life tell us about you? Have you arrived? We ought to see the fruit of growth. Here are some marks of spiritual maturity:

1. An appetite for spiritual "solid food." This is more than a hunger to learn because even unbelievers can have that. This a desire to know God and to make Him known.
2. Victory over religious competition. This makes you less concerned with your worship style preferences and more thankful that you have been invited to this meal.
3. Recognition of God's invisible work. Can you see the building going up? Can you see the crop growing? Be confident that God's word delivered will produce results even if natural eyes cannot always see them.

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