

1 Corinthians 3:1-17

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[0 : 00] What does it mean to be the church? We looked last week at this idea of spiritual maturity. So what does it mean to be a spiritually mature church?

Paul gives four vivid analogies. A nursery, a field, a building, and a temple. And I want to jump right into our text. So if you have a Bible, please open to 1 Corinthians 3.

Follow along with me. First in nursery, from verse 1. But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. Notice how he begins with gentleness, calling them brothers.

He starts relationally with a term of familial endearment. And this is his analogy. But he calls them infants.

[1 : 09] That seems insulting, doesn't it? I want to be clear here. I don't think Paul is actually insulting them in 1-1. I don't think he's making a criticism.

He is referring, I think, by way of 2-1 back to his first visit. It's something of a flashback here in 3-1 compared with and even now, which comes later in verse 2.

Remember from Acts 18. He visited them for a year and a half. And as with any good parent, he fed these newborns liquid.

I recently learned that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends feeding a newborn a liquid diet for as many as, or actually as few as, six months.

That's the minimum. And that's what Paul did. That's exactly what happened in Corinth. Paul is saying, when I first visited you, none of you were Christians.

[2 : 08] And that's okay. You were new. You were brand new to the Christian faith. You were brand new to this idea that Jesus died for you. Had no expectation that you were going to be mature.

It made sense that we spent our time on the basics. It would have been a disservice to you, Corinthian church, if I had given you solid food. It actually would have been counterproductive for me to share that secret wisdom I talked about ten verses ago with you at that time.

It's okay. You're going to grow up to be fine, young men and women of Christ. And so when Paul left Corinth, years ago now, his expectation was that they were going to keep maturing.

And that's when we get to the end of verse 2. And even now, you are not yet ready. For you are still of the flesh. This frustration is becoming apparent.

They certainly sat up in their seats at this point. Oh no, he's going to bring it. He's ticked. They were a church that was still running around in their diapers.

[3 : 26] And the primary symptom here is, as we've been looking at since chapter 1, factionalism. It's not the only symptom. I mean, he's going to get to other symptoms of their immaturity in chapters 5 through 14.

But in this text, he's back to that problem we looked at a couple chapters ago. And that actually has captured his mind here through the end of chapter 4. For Paul, the fact that they had divided on the basis of spiritual leaders, they had allotted themselves to and built themselves on individual human leaders, this was a big sign of something very troubling.

They were still infants. Some churches have nurseries. This church was a nursery. Paul's anger, like that of a good father, quickly dissipates and gives way to the teachable moment.

If you, Corinthian church, have not grown up, then we probably need to focus on what a church should look like. That's exactly what Paul does. He uses three analogies to show the Corinthians what a mature church looks like.

So first, a mature church is like a field, verses 6 through 9a. Yes, somebody planted the seeds. Yes, somebody else watered the seeds. But it was God who gave growth.

[4 : 52] It seems a bit like, you know, Adam Smith and the Wealth of Nations here. Division of labor makes for efficient production. But it's not quite. In fact, Paul the seed planter and Apollos the water bringer are fellow workers of God, and it is an efficient process.

That much is clear from verse 9. But Paul and Apollos are in subordinate roles. Verse 7 is the heart of the matter. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

A mature church recognizes that it is God at the center, and God and only God who gives growth. If you want to grow in your faith, if you want to grow up in the faith, absolutely find a mature Christian to disciple you.

Absolutely put yourself under the preaching of mature preachers who will bring the word to you. Absolutely belong to a church who will daily give the gospel to you.

But don't think for a minute that it's anybody but God who brings the growth. If you lose sight of God the Father, you may be a good follower of Paul or Apollos or even Cephas.

[6 : 14] But you're also lost. And believe me, it's easy to disconnect here. It's easy to become a student of the Bible. Or in the academy, a Pauline specialist or a Matthean scholar.

Or theologically, in America, it's especially easy to be a Protestant. Or, you know, it's a little harder to be a Calvinist, but still doable. And it's very easy now to follow the latest rock star pastor.

Even in our little church here, some might think that their growth is tied only to the preaching of one particular pastor or another. I mean, this always becomes an issue when it's time to plant a new congregation.

And so it's easy, it's that easy, to lose sight of God's central role. The only effective role in the process. But he doesn't stop with the field. He moves on to a building.

Verses 9b through 16. I'm sorry, 15. Here, Paul makes two points. First, it's the foundation that matters most. Verse 11.

[7 : 22] Paul states it confidently. And the implication is clear. If your foundation is something other than Jesus Christ, you don't actually have a church.

Maybe you have a social club oriented toward good works. Maybe you have a dinner club. But if you have anything other than Jesus Christ and him crucified as your foundation, remember back to 2.2, I preached Christ and him crucified.

You're not even a part of this conversation. You don't have a church. This conversation is actually for the church. His second point carries the bulk of the paragraph.

How you build matters. Or more precisely, what you build with matters. In verse 12, he gives us a list of building materials, right? Gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw.

They are an order of value, and I'm sure the Corinthian church caught on to that. But Paul's point is not about market value. His point is about durability.

[8 : 28] The order here is that of what is most likely to survive a testing fire. You have a foundation of Jesus Christ, so you have a church. This much in Corinth, at least at this point, is not in doubt.

But what next? How are you building? Are you building for durability? That's hard to do. Buying the right materials, buying the best materials, taking the time and the care to use them properly, getting the training and the equipment it takes to build with the right materials.

These are not easy things. Building with straw, on the other hand, that's cheap and easy. Someone who bought a home here in Hyde Park recently, and who spent the better part of six months discovering just how shoddy is the work of the renovators and builders.

This point is very clear to me. It doesn't take but sticking your head up in our attic to see that there is no insulation in the ceiling.

It takes one batch of burnt cookies to realize that our smoke detectors are not connected to anything. But what about our church? What about you?

[9 : 46] Are we taking the cheap and easy route with our spiritual maturity? In what ways have we resigned ourselves to the big box, fast food McNugget mentality of spiritual growth?

Now, lest you think I'm trying to guilt you into the hard work of getting up early to read your Bible and pray, and, you know, ripping the band-aid off in old and comfortable sin, and begin the slow, arduous process of becoming more holy for the sake of salvation, I would remind you, and me, that the foundation of this building is the cross of Jesus.

We're already the church. We who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins are already past the impossibility of earning salvation.

We are a temple. So verses 16 and 17 give us our final analogy. It's a comfort and a warning.

We are God's temple here, and we have his spirit. So whether we are the spirituals, the spiritually mature people that Paul described at the end of chapter 2, or we are still spiritual infants, we have God's spirit.

[11 : 04] We have the capacity to grow. But there's a warning as well. For those who would challenge the growth, the foundation and focus of God's people who are sincerely and earnestly growing, you will get God's wrath.

Verse 17. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. God will destroy him.

For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. So take care. You may not be contributing to the spiritual growth of your brothers and sisters in this church family, but you had best not be distracting or preventing them from growing.

Now, I want to say a lot more here, but fortunately, I don't actually have to because Paul's going to come back to this point a lot in chapters 5 through 14.

So let me conclude. Paul has painted a picture of the Corinthian church as it should be. He's painted a picture of the church as it could be. It's how we should look.

[12 : 11] If we understand that God is at the center of our growth, not our leaders, and that our foundation is the crucified and risen Jesus, not our piety or ministry plans, and that we are the temple of God, home to his Holy Spirit, and that we must protect that for each and every one of us, then the expectation is that we should grow up.

So are we maturing? Are we as a church growing up? Let me pray. Father in heaven, author of creation, we have come to you as children.

Grow us in faith on the foundation of your son's sacrifice, filling us with your spirit, that we may become mature. I pray these things in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.