

Divisions in the Church

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Date: 15 September 2024

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[0 : 0 0] I clearly remember one Sunday evening many years ago. I'd preached a sermon on a particular passage of the Bible. I wasn't feeling too good about the sermon I had preached. I actually never do feel very good about the sermons I preach, and what people said to me afterward didn't make me feel any better about myself. One person, as I was leaving the church, said, oh, I heard John MacArthur this afternoon powerfully speaking from that text. And still another said, I heard Kenny Stewart preach on that passage, and he took a different line from you. And then someone else said, I heard Mark Driscoll preaching from that, and it was amazing. You know, when I heard those three people saying that to me, I felt like saying to them, well, good for you. Why exactly are you saying these things to me? I already feel pretty bad. Now I just feel plain lousy. It appears to me that when people say these things, they're revealing far more about themselves and their lack of understanding than they are about me and the sermons I preach. These sermons could and should be better than they are, but it was in what they said that they revealed their spiritual immaturity.

I listened to John MacArthur. I listened to Mark Driscoll. I listened to Kenny Stewart. None of them ever said, I listened to God speaking through his word. Without being disrespectful to those preachers who are far more gifted than I am, Paul had to put up with the same kind of nonsense in Corinth. One Christian would say, I prefer the way Apollos explains things. And another would say, well, I prefer Peter's method. Not to dissuade anyone from listening to sermons online, I find the practice very helpful indeed. But what's of primary importance is not the man who is preaching the message, but the message itself. What's of primary importance is not the man who's preaching the message, but the message itself. What's important is not that our ears are tickled, but that our minds are renewed, our hearts are warmed, and our wills move to action. It is God who speaks through His word, not those God chooses to speak the word which matters.

Such talk is evidence of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3 verse 3 of behaving only in a human way. And with such people, we need to go back to basics and remind them it is the message of the cross which is important, not the messenger of the cross. And that a person is saved by his faith, not in the preacher, but by his faith in Christ. Such a person cannot move on to spiritual meat.

He's fit only to drink milk. There are so many problems about being devoted to a particular preacher. It divides fellowships. It causes strife. But most serious of all, when that messenger to whom they are so devoted falls into sin, they become disillusioned with the message that preacher preached.

Putting a man before the message isn't only spiritually immature and damaging to the unity of the church, but at least the Christians losing their grip on Christ. The question then becomes, did they ever follow Christ in the first place, or were they just following the preacher?

[3 : 4 9] In our passage here in 1 Corinthians 3, for those of you who are new here, we're working our way through 1 Corinthians at the moment, Paul offers four challenges to the Christian who puts the messenger of the cross before the message of the cross. The challenge of the field, first of all, from verse 5 through 9. The challenge of the building, from verse 10 through 15.

The challenge of the temple, verses 16 and 17. And the challenge of wisdom, verses 19 through 23. Let's not any of us put the messenger of the cross on a higher platform than the message of the cross, lest we, like the Corinthian Christians, be fit only for spiritual milk.

So first of all then, we have the challenge of the field from verse 5 through 9. The challenge of the field. What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Apollos was the greatest preacher of the early church, without doubt. Paul was a mighty apostle. But by using what rather than who, we are not drawn to who these men were, but to what they did, their function. It is never the right question to ask, who are the great preachers of today's church? It is better to ask, what are the great preachers of today's church? Because if we ask the question, who, it leads to the cult of the personality, a negative trait which infects the modern church. But Paul doesn't ask the who question, he asks the what question and answers it, servants. Servants. I quote from one Bible commentator,

Servant is a word which stresses the lowly character of the service rendered. It ridicules the tendency to make much of preachers. Who, after all, would set servants on pedestals? Servants. That's all the greatest preachers of the early church and the mighty apostle were. Servants.

Servants of whom? Servants through whom you believe as the Lord assigned to each. They are servants of God, to whom He has given a servant function in the church, not to draw attention to themselves, but to proclaim the cross of Jesus Christ so that through the cross people would believe.

[6 : 37] Who would set these servants on pedestals when their function is to draw attention to the glory of the love of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ? We need to stop setting the great preachers of today's church on pedestals because by so doing, we are diminishing the glory due to God alone and lessening the impact of the message of the cross.

Paul illustrates this principle by talking of farmers and fields. He refers to himself as planting. I planted, he says. Back in chapter 1 verse 17, he says, Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel. Paul arrived in Corinth and immediately set about preaching. And as he preached, that gospel seed was planted. People listened to the message and responded in faith. They believed the gospel. He then refers to Apollos as watering. Apollos came after Paul and through his preaching solidified the church in Corinth. He taught people how to live out the gospel, as it were. They had believed through the message Paul preached. Now Apollos watered that seed into the ground. Paul planted. Apollos watered. That was their function. As such, in verse 8, Paul says, hew plants and hew waters are one. There's this unity between Paul and Apollos. They serve different functions, but they are fellow workers. Let's not divide them by favoring one over the other. They're not rivals trying to win a following for themselves, enough of comparing one preacher against another.

But what's most important is what Paul says in verse 6 and 7. But God gave the growth. So neither he who plants Paul or he who waters Apollos is anything, but only God who gives the growth. For as much as a farmer sows seed and waters it, growth is not assured. Paul preached and Apollos preached, but it was God who opened the hearts of the people of Corinth to believe the gospel. It was the Spirit of God who brought them to see their need of Christ, the Savior. It was the Spirit of God who gave them new birth and brought them to a saving faith in Jesus. It wasn't Paul, and it wasn't Apollos. It was God.

Now, there are many applications of this principle. The preacher faithfully... This is a note to self, by the way. The preacher faithfully preaches and leaves the results in the hands of God. He leaves the results in the hands of God.

For many years, the seed of the gospel seems to produce no fruit, and then suddenly many people are saved at the same time. It is not a function of the preacher's skill, but of God's sovereign hand at work. For those of us who preach, we must remember this. We faithfully discharge the duty God has given us to make Christ known, and we leave the results with Him. But in the context of this chapter, our application is that the only one to whom we owe allegiance and devotion is the God who gave the growth. Using the language of verse 7, He is the only one who is worth anything at all.

- [10 : 23] Not Paul, nor Apollos, but God. God's servants aren't that important that we should put them up in pedestals and worship them. Only God is worthy of our faith and trust. Christ alone is worthy of our lives, for He gave His life for us. The challenge of the field puts pay to the cult of the personality.

It is the message of the cross which is important, not its messengers. The second challenge, the challenge of the building, verses 10 through 15.

Challenge of the building. At the end of verse 9, Paul moves on from the image of the field to that of the building, and he says to them, you're God's building. And he begins by focusing on the foundations. There's only one foundation upon which any church is erected, as he explains in verse 11.

No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Paul's referring here, of course, not to a physical building. There were no physical churches in the New Testament. We need to remember that, by the way. No such thing as a physical church in the New Testament. He's not referring to a physical building, but to the church, which, as we know, is not a building. It is those who have faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The foundation of that building is not a preacher such that we should ever say of a church, oh, that church there is built on that preacher and his ministry. For any church to be a true Christian church, it must be founded on the message of the cross. If any preacher should talk about how he planted a church and it grew to gazillions of people, he needs to get humble.

- [12 : 14] When Paul came to Corinth, he did not put himself forward as an orator or philosopher, as we saw from what David said to us a few weeks ago. He preached Christ and Him crucified so that the faith of the Corinthian Christians would not rest upon Him, but upon Jesus. And that's the aim of every faithful servant of Christ, to point away from the self, lest the church should found itself upon Him, toward Jesus so that the church is founded upon the cross. If the foundation of the church is the Christ preached and not the preacher, Paul describes how to build on that foundation.

He contrasts those who build with gold and silver and precious stones to those who build with wood, hay and straw. He's referring to those who build the foundation of the gospel with the truths of the Bible, against those who build the foundations of the gospel with the fluff of the cult of the personality combined with many personal hobby horses and debatable issues. When the judgment comes, every preacher's work will be revealed for what it is. Of course, that preacher was a Christian, so he will be saved. But if he's built a church based on the cult of the personality, his work will be burned up, even if it's a mega church. But if the preacher has built on the foundation of Christ a church strong in doctrine and evangelism, no matter how large or small that church is, his work will stand the test of fire. But of course, in many ways, we don't have to wait long for a church to reveal itself anyway. A church built on the cult of the personality will quickly tend towards strife. It will always be fighting someone, somewhere about something.

And when that preacher leaves, the church will disintegrate into factions and quickly decline. But if a church is built on the solid foundation of Christ and not the preacher, it will remain united after that preacher leaves, will hold steadfast to the truth of Christ, and will continue to grow.

So, it should be our ambition here in Crow Road Free Church to build upon the foundation of Christ with gold, silver, and precious stones of a deeper knowledge of Scripture, a deeper experience of Jesus, and a deeper commitment to making Jesus Christ known to the world around us. After all, that's the point, is it not? The message of the cross is far more important than the messenger of the cross.

We don't want our church on the day of judgment to be burned up. Rather, our greatest desire is for our church to stand as a living testament to the grace of Christ, to the love of the Father, and to the presence of the Holy Spirit, and all to the glory of God. The challenge of the building.

[15 : 32] Well, then, third challenge. The challenge of the temple, verses 16 and 17. The challenge of the temple, you know, we're all tempted at times to grumble about the church. We're slow to put our shoulders to the plow and invest in its health. Other things come before the church, even if those things aren't quite as important as family or work. In these verses, Paul tells us something we often forget. Do you not know that you are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in you? Do you not know that?

The church does not worship in a temple. The church is the temple. As the people of God who are the temple worship Him, God is present in a more powerful sense than He ever was in the Old Testament temple of Solomon. We are the temple of God, and in and among us, God's Spirit dwells. God Himself is here this evening as His name is worshiped, His presence is prayed for, and His Word is preached. Perhaps that'll give us pause for thought before we grumble about the church. This is a temple of the Holy Spirit on earth.

Let's treat it with the respect it's due. Paul goes on. He says God's temple is holy. Holy. It's been called out of the world. It's been set apart for Him. The things of the world have no place here. The jealousy, the strife, the hatred, and the greed, the personality cults, and the tribalism of the world are things the church has been called to leave behind it. Rather, God has set us apart for Himself through the sanctifying sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The values of His kingdom are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and truth. We are holy in that we are devoted not to ourselves or to any other human being or philosophy. We are devoted to Christ.

Christ. We read then these chilling words, if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. It's not our temple. This is God's temple. The church is not our fiefdom. It's God's church. If we should ruin and destroy the church of God, He will hold us culpable.

We can destroy a church with our words, our attitudes, our actions. Gossip can destroy a church.

[18 : 32] Jealousy can destroy a church. Faction destroys a church. Power games and arguments among members can destroy a church. But woe betide that person who is responsible for the destruction.

of a church. If through our allegiance to a prominent personality, we should breed a party spirit within the church, which should lead to disunity and division, we should fear for our salvation.

If our words promote jealousy and strife, if our desire for power and control over others should damage the church, God will damage us. It's a sobering reality, is it not? And should make us treat the church gently and with great respect? Discouraging and dividing God's people is a cardinal crime in His eyes because we are His temple and God's Spirit dwells among us.

It's a chilling warning to preachers like myself not to act in such ways as to draw attention to themselves rather than Jesus. And it's a chilling warning to us all not to fixate on the charisma, the personality, and the giftedness of the preacher rather than on the message he is preaching.

Well, lastly, we've seen the challenge of the field, the building, the temple, the challenge of wisdom in verses 19 through 23, or 18 through 23 really. The apostle Paul returns to the theme he spent the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians emphasizing, the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. Corinth, as we know, Campbell explained this to us, was a cultural melting pot, but its culture was dominated by Greek philosophers with their supposed wisdom and rhetorical skill.

[20 : 24] These philosophers could talk the high legs off a donkey and sell snow to an Eskimo. As we learn from 1 Corinthians 1 verse 21, the world did not know God through wisdom. In other words, no matter how well we understand Plato, no matter how we live according to Aristotle, we will never know God through them. Paul adds to that here in verse 18 by using the expression wise in this age, as if to say that the wisdom of this world changes according to the fashions of the day. We know this is true because what was considered wise a hundred years ago is now considered foolish.

It was once the height of wisdom to talk of the responsibility of the individual to promote the well-being of the community. Now it's the height of wisdom to talk of the responsibility of the community to promote the well-being of the individual. Philosophies change quicker than the seasons. In a hundred years' time, the wisdom of today will be considered foolish, and people will say, how could they have believed such foolish things back in 2024?

But God's wisdom, which the world considers foolishness, never changes. It's a wisdom the supposed wise of this world can never attain to by their philosophical inquiries. It's the wisdom of the cross, that wisdom so hated by Jews and Greeks. But it's that very wisdom which is the power of God unto salvation for all who will believe in Jesus. The kind of preaching which should attract the Corinthian church is that which appears to the world to be foolish. Paul is thus telling the Corinthians that rather than being attracted to wise preachers who adopt the language and methodology of the Greek philosophers, as Campbell explained this to us, they should be attracted by the seemingly foolish preachers who only ever speak of Christ and crucified, as Alex said last Sunday night. To appear wise by following the most sophisticated preachers is spiritual suicide and so much foolishness.

Why settle for the wisdom of this world when, as Paul says in 22 and 23, all things are yours. All are yours and you are Christ and Christ's as God. The treasures of God and the cross of Christ are beyond valuation. The glory of His grace so much greater than anything this world can offer us.

You know, we buy our children expensive toys for Christmas, but when they unwrap their presents, they spend all day playing with the boxes and not the expensive toys. Hundreds of years ago, one of our Scottish forefathers in the faith, Thomas Boston, wrote these words. He said, a man may preach like an angel, but be useless. A man may preach like an angel, but be useless. Since these words were brought to my attention first by Donald MacLeod, they have challenged and convicted me no end. Our greatest need isn't to have ministers who can preach like angels, but to have servant-hearted, Christ-exalting, Christ-focused heralds of the gospel like Paul, even if, according to the standards of this world, the message they preach and the way they preach it is utter foolishness. By all means, I encourage you to listen to online sermons, but do not listen to them speaking about Christ. Listen to Christ through them. And if I or any other preacher strays from the blessed ground of preaching Christ and Him crucified onto the cursed ground of promoting our own personalities or hobby horses, close your ears. By all means, love and honor preachers of the gospel, but do not follow them or be devoted to them, lest the spirit of jealousy and strife should enter into your heart, and you miss out on the richer, the great riches of all things being yours in Christ.

[24 : 47] Don't play with the box. Play with the expensive gift God has for you there. So, spiritual immaturity consists in party spirit fostered by the cult of the personality.

And Paul challenges this human behavior with four challenges, the challenge of the field, the building, the temple, and wisdom. The ultimate truth is that according to the wisdom of this world, Jesus Himself preached a foolish message and attracted to Himself foolish people. According to the wisdom of the wisdom of this world, the ultimate foolishness was for Jesus to die on a Roman cross.

But in the power and wisdom of God, the message of the cross is life for we who believe. The preacher tonight may only get one out of ten, and so we should. But the Christ we preach, Lord's Day by Lord's Day, gets ten out of ten every time.

To go back to Paul's language in verse two, are we ready as Crow Road Free Church to go beyond the spiritual milk of basics and start eating the solid food of gospel living? May God bless His Word to us.