

Sermon 9: 1 Corinthians 3:1-4: Spiritual Babies

OUTLINE

Baby Christians
Baby food
Baby behavior

INTRODUCTION

Are you spiritually mature? How do you test for spiritual maturity? The Corinthians thought they were spiritually mature but were not. Paul has already commended them for excelling in all knowledge and speech and spiritual gifts, 1:5-7, and they thought they had arrived. If you look carefully there you will notice that v6 is wedged in between to remind them, that God gave Christ, God gave the gospel, God gave these spiritual gifts as confirmation of the work He is doing. But like any child who misappropriates words of affirmation they will not take it as fuel to continue to grow and try harder but as a cue to stop and pat themselves' on the back and think the work is over for they have arrived. We all desire to be mature but like that inexperienced youth we always think we are more mature, more wise, more in control than we really are. We are always able to spot the need for maturity in others but are very poor at evaluating our own spiritual condition. In the portion before us, Paul has to play the role of the parent and dress down these over-confident Corinthians.

As Christians we must grow. God has called us to be holy as He is holy, loving as He is loving; compassionate as He is compassionate, and when we get saved we are not perfect, we have not yet arrived, there is a life-long path of growth that we are to commit to. Sadly, Christians often halt in their progress. The problem in the spiritual life if you are not progressing you are regressing. Regression is a psychological term for people who act younger than they are, in psychology it is usually a coping mechanism for trauma, but in Christianity regression is a constant reverting to the ways of the flesh, the old man, the self-absorbed childlike behavior of the unbeliever who is not walking in the Spirit. Refusing to grow up is a bad thing. You know the story of Peter Pan, the boy who refused to grow up. Some Christians have a Peter Pan syndrome. In Christianity there is a child-like behavior which is good, where Jesus tells us to come like children, to come as those who are weak, as those who are needy, as those needing God to Father us, and to humbly cast ourselves upon Him. But then there is child-like behavior which is bad, Paul addresses it here. We will look at these verses under three headings. Baby Christians; baby food; and baby behavior.

Baby Christians

V1, 'But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.' We are familiar with the context, the Corinthians have been going after so called 'wisdom' seeking so called 'spirituality' so that they might become the so called 'mature'. In their folly they have sought for things freely available in the gospel. Not only have they wasted their time this pursuit has caused them to act in worldly ways and divide the church. Paul has been speaking quite frankly about their error, he has not restrained himself.

Chapter 3 picks up where 1:10-17 left off, speaking about going after certain teachers and causing division. The whole of chapter 3 is a reflection on ministers and the nature of their ministry, but before Paul goes there he has a hard word

for these Corinthians. Now you will notice that Paul begins stressing the fraternal that they have in Christ, 'brothers.' He is going to call them a bunch of babies and to grow up, so starting with some assurances of his affection and their standing in Christ is a good thing.

The Corinthians had become 'experts' on what a truly 'spiritual' message should say and how it should be presented. Like a child that will not be taught by their parents about pop-culture; or their favourite actor; or their favourite computer game, the Corinthians had become cultured despisers who could not be told anything. So the opening words by Paul must have dropped like a hammer, 'I could not address you as spiritual people.' 'Yes, you heard me right. You are not spiritual. In fact you are the opposite, you are people of the flesh, you are not mature, not competent to lead, not suitable to teach, but babies in Christ.' Ouch!

Now those who know anything about Pauline thought will know that for Paul to call someone born of the Spirit, rescued by the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, people of the flesh, it is practical a contradiction. It is the sort of thing he says about the unbeliever, for example Romans 8:5-8, 'For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.' That is how Paul contrasts believers and unbelievers, people of the Spirit/spiritual, and people of the flesh/natural. Paul is not saying they are not believers, but that they are acting like unbelievers. That instead of acting like those who have had the benefit of 18 months of Paul's ministry, followed by Apollos and have been saved for about 5 years, they are still acting like those who are not saved. This makes them anything but the mature and spiritual people they think they are, they are saved but they are spiritual babies.

Now some have used these verses to justify what is called 'The Carnal Christian' teaching. This is a teaching that is associated with dispensationalism, therefore it is very popular in Charismatic contexts, and mainstream evangelical thought. Al Martin gives a layman's definition of the teaching, 'Now what is the doctrine? The doctrine is basically this, that there are three kinds of people in the world, and they generally take it from 1 Corinthians 2 and 3 where you find these three words occurring, natural man, carnal man and spiritual man. This is usually the way in which the doctrine is presented. People who have never received Jesus Christ are natural men. They are sinners by nature and by practice, they are dead in their sins and have no knowledge of God. This is true; this is the Bible doctrine of human depravity. Then they say the next class of people is the carnal man. This is the man or woman who has received Jesus as his savior, he believes that Christ died on the cross for him, and believing that he has been made a child of God, but, (listen carefully), you never know he is a child of God because although he is saved by the blood of Jesus he lives just like natural man. He lives addicted to the flesh, to the world and to self. You cannot discern the fruit of the Spirit or any pursuit of holiness, but you must not ever call him an unregenerate unsaved man because he has accepted Jesus. He is a man who is saved from hell but who is not yet saved from himself. And so this is the carnal man, the man who is saved but still living like he was not saved.'¹ Sadly, this

¹ <https://www.monergism.com/carnal-christian>. Accessed 3/14/2024.

teaching has taught a two step salvation where you can receive Jesus as Savior, and maybe later receive Him as Lord, that you can have faith without repentance; regeneration without holiness, and so if they die, they are 'once saved always saved.' There is a denial that the fruit of good works must follow faith; there is a denial of God's work within us causing us to will and to work in holiness and perseverance. It is often thought that this is 'Calvinism' but it is not the traditional teaching of the perseverance of the saints, the P of TULIP, it is a new and unbiblical teaching.

We need to recognise the difference between the carnal Christian doctrine which separates faith from repentance and regeneration from holiness to immaturity and backsliding. Christians can sin, they can have bad days, but they do not say to themselves, 'Oh well, I am just a carnal Christian. I have faith, and I am saved by faith alone aren't I? I can be saved without repentance.' If this is the sort of thing that you are saying to yourself you have drunk the carnal Christianity Kool-Aid, and are in error. We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that stands alone. It is the same Holy Spirit who enables both faith and repentance in every true work of regeneration. This is why an unholy Christian is a contradiction in terms, those who are born of the Spirit have a new heart given by the Spirit, an inner compulsion to the good that unbelievers do not have, it is uncomfortable to sin, though still possible, and every true believer will eventually repent and return to holiness. When we experience a rebuke from our consciences, or like the Corinthians through having our errors exposed by Paul, we are grieved at our sin, we confess it, and we recommit ourselves to holy living once again.

Baby food

V2-3a, 'I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for you are still of the flesh.' The milk-solid food categories were common ones in the ancient world, the difference between a breastfed baby and someone who has been weaned. The author of Hebrews uses this distinction when addressing the Jewish Christians who were considering abandoning the gospel to go back to Judaism under the pressure of persecution, Heb. 5:12-13, 'For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.' In the context of Hebrews the milk was the basic truth about salvation, and the solid food was things like how the OT taught Christ in types like through the priesthood of Melchizedek; and a discussion around covenant theology, chapters 7-8.

The difficulty we have with applying that way of thinking here is this: are we going to say that Paul is calling the gospel milk, when he has just said that the wisdom he speaks among the mature is the gospel? For this reason many commentators suggest this use of milk and solid food is not Paul's but the Corinthians who accused Paul of giving them milk and not solid food, and this is how they were justifying going after other teachers and despising the gospel preached by Paul. If this is the case, it adjusts the meaning slightly. The Corinthians thought Paul was giving them milk, but Paul in giving them the gospel was giving them meat; they thought Paul was treating them like children when they were mature, but the gospel is the wisdom of God taught by the Spirit which makes one mature. They thought they needed more than the gospel, Paul

is telling them, you never get past the gospel, and even now they were still despising the gospel. I can see how both could possibly work, but this seems the better reading to my mind. It is true that there is a difference between the basic truth of Jesus loves me and died for me, and the profound truths of an eternal counsel of Redemption from before the foundation of the earth. But it seems from the context and Paul's method so far in 1 Corinthians that going back to the gospel is his method of sorting out their problems.

The gospel is not the baby food, and other secondary doctrines the meat. The trouble is we spend more time on secondary things, even wrong things rather than getting back to the gospel and drilling more deeply into it. The Corinthians wanted more wisdom not the gospel. What do we want? Living in politically charged time when everything is political we want more politics, we want a muscular Christianity that calls Christians to war; that trumpets out the right morals, and the right answers, and names our enemies. We want a socially active message that will protect our children; that will defend marriage; that will push back at the influences of our culture that threaten to drown the church. Living in the therapeutic age where life coaches make a living from giving advice some want more practical advice on how to live; they look at pop-psychology and see the technique books, the to-do-lists, the how to manuals that take the thought out of living and just spell out how you can have an easier life how to do the right thing. At every moment in history there will be pressures brought to bear upon Christians which will make them feel that the church and the message of the church needs to be adjusted just so to match the climate we live in. The gospel moves into the background while something else takes the foreground. What do you think we need right now, what do you think the church should be about right now? For some we need miracles; we need a return of the office and ministry of the apostle and prophet; we need spiritual intercessors; we need to bless Israel; we need to focus on Elon Musk's latest reveal about brain implants and expose it as the number of the beast; the Corinthians thought they need a form of wisdom. We always need the gospel.

Let me open up here about the way the elders of the church think about the centrality of the gospel. There is a very deliberate philosophy of ministry and philosophy of preaching that centers on the gospel. Contrary to popular belief, the gospel is not only for the unsaved, you need to preach the gospel to yourself every day; you need to have the gospel preached to you every Lord's Day; you need the Lord's Supper to bring you back to remembering the gospel every Sunday. We observe that when Paul deals with problems in the various churches he takes them back to what God did in the gospel. All of the imperatives of the Christian life flow from the central reality of the gospel. I have illustrated this many times in past letters, for example, when Paul dealt with disunity in Philippi, how did he solve it, he took them back to the act of Christ humbling Himself in the gospel so that they might be humble and have the same mind towards each other. When Paul calls the Ephesians to forgive one another, Eph. 4:32, 'Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.' We are dealing here with the issue of spiritual immaturity and the need to grow spiritually, let me show you how going back to the gospel helps us here too.

Firstly, let's talk about the motivation to grow, Rom. 12:1-2, 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and

perfect.’ Pursue holiness, not because you are scared of hell, not because you are looking for happiness, but because God has been so good to you in the gospel. Consider his mercies, count how much it cost to save you. No one has ever done so much for you, how can we not want to give our all to God. What about the power to grow? God in the gospel, comes to dwell in your heart, to help you to will and do according to His will; He fits you with a new heart that is inclined to the good. The gospel reminds us of the resources that are ours. What about the shape of our growth? 2 Cor. 3:18, ‘And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.’ The more you look at Jesus, study Jesus, love Jesus, have your heart melted by all that Jesus is and what He has done for you, you become more like what you love.

Paul does this for the Corinthians, are you divided, let me remind you about this thing called ‘the mind of Christ.’ Just watch as we go through the rest of this book, Paul is going to change the way we think about each other as we view each other in light of the gospel that saved us. Here is one example, 1 Cor. 8:11-12, ‘And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹²Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.’ The Corinthians are not thinking about those who are weak when they are eating meat offered to idols and some led by their example are stumbling into sin. Paul puts a new perspective on these weak brethren in 2 ways, firstly, Jesus was willing to lay down His life for them, why won’t you? And secondly, they are one with Christ to sin against them, is to sin against His body. You don’t get past the gospel!

Baby behavior

V3b-4, ‘For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?’ Paul zeroes in here on the childish, the unsaved like behavior of the Corinthians. This is where he returns to the topic that started off the whole discussion so far, divisions that result from man following. Childishness is a very suitable analogy for sin isn’t it. It is not as if children as sinful and adults are not, no, not at all, as adults we get better at excuses, at respectable sins, at hiding them. But childhood is a time when our self-absorbed ways are on full display. They are a great picture of our sinfulness. ‘Don’t talk to strangers! Don’t take things from strangers!’ Do we listen to false teachers and accept their teaching? Yes we do! ‘Stop biting your sister!’ Do we backbite our brethren in Christ?

When we are first born again we are alive spiritually but still like a new born baby who needs spiritual nourishment from God’s word, and a family to look after us, the Church.

But as time goes on we should learn to walk and talk, and to feed ourselves, we change our diets and eat our veggies, we learn to get along with the other family members, we learn skills and are then able to babysit and look after our younger brothers and sisters. Then as with our children chores and responsibilities come into it, and we all have to do our bit around the house to keep it running and in order.

Now imagine a situation where this does not happen, think of the Christian who always crawls and never walks, who always has to have the book read to them and never learn to read it for themselves, who can only drink milk and not eat

meat. The Christian who cries when things don't go their way, who needs someone else to clean up their diapers. They never do anything for themselves, so everyone else has to do it, and they never do anything around the house so other Christians have to bear a double load. Those who don't socialize with the other members of the family. They constantly follow strangers and accept things from strangers that they shouldn't. Paul is seeing this behaviour in the Corinthian Church. In particular there is the problem of jealousy and strife. Richard Ganz tells the story of a girl who experienced envy or jealousy at Christmas time. "On Christmas Eve, in her package was a doll—the gift she wanted! She anxiously watched her sister open her present. It was a doll, too! Her immediate thought was, 'Why did Mom give her the best doll?' She quietly took her present upstairs to her bedroom, but her sister followed her. She came close and whispered in her ear, 'Do you want to trade dolls?' In that instance she knew that her sister was envious of her doll." (p48). Christians envy each others possessions, each others abilities, each others popularity, and even each others spirituality. Competitiveness comes in and like on the playground, Christians get all in a huff and say, 'I am not going to play with you anymore, you are no longer my best friend.' The tragedy is that it sounds small but it can destroy Churches.

So how do we know how childish, instead of childlike we are? Paul tells the Corinthians that he can tell how immature they are by how much they act like the world. He sees the ways of the world as childish and ignorant and the ways of the Spirit as mature and wise. Galatians 5:19-23 (ESV) Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." Notice how Paul puts jealousy and idolatry on the same page, and how most of the things he cites as works of the flesh have to do with the infighting that goes on in the Church. If we bring the rancour, the sarcasm, and the despising criticism of the 'to the editor' part of the newspapers into the Church we are acting like the unsaved. If we hold grudges and not talk to someone like those families who are divided because of an inheritance dispute, we are like the world. If we slander the character of those who present different points of view to us in the Church, then we are using the manipulative techniques of modern politicians and are full of the flesh. In the Churches that James was writing to there were some Christians who were doing these things and thinking very highly of themselves, listen to what he says to them, James 3:13-18 (ESV), "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

Spiritual maturity is revealed in our unity, in our love, in our humble service of others. We can be full of sophistication and intellect; we can be rich and hold a high station in life, but without love these are nothing. Let me ask you, are you

spiritually mature? Would Paul be proud of your advancement in your walk?
Have you left the gospel behind as milk and are distracted with something else?
Let us have a clear picture of spiritual maturity in our minds and lean into the
gospel that we will be those who are mature.