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“God’s people are called on not only to learn the ‘solid food’ of their faith, but to apply it to their relationships with one another and with their Lord.”

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1 CORINTHIANS 3:1–23

Having made clear to the Corinthians that spiritual wisdom is different and superior to human wisdom, Paul remembers that when he first arrived in Corinth, the Corinthians had been drowning in the arrogance of human wisdom. Paul’s arrival allowed them to learn the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Like infants, they were only given the “milk” of basic Christian doctrine and did not, at that time, receive the more complex “solid food.”

What might these fundamentals have involved? What does it mean to be an “infant” Christian? Perhaps we sense an inkling of the early church’s understanding of the basics of the Christian faith by reading Hebrews 6:1–3. The author of Hebrews calls on his readers to move beyond the “elementary teachings” and grow in the knowledge of faith. The author of Hebrews mentions six fundamental items: 1) “repentance” an understanding that sin exists and we must attempt to turn away from those things which violate God’s Law; 2) “faith in God” which involves knowing that sins from which we turn will be forgiven by the grace of God in Jesus Christ; 3) “instruction about baptism” so that believers understand its purpose and importance; 4) “laying on of hands” so that followers of Christ understand the significance of their pastors having been ordained as special servants of Christ; 5) “the resurrection of the dead” which involves an understanding of the resurrection of all people on the Day of Judgment; 6) “eternal judgment” which claims that those who reject God’s grace and remain in their sinful ways will indeed be condemned.

Since the Corinthian Christians continued to argue and demonstrate their jealousies toward each other, Paul concluded they had not progressed beyond these simple fundamentals. Ouch! That sounds like an insult to

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me. Of course, it was meant to hurt a little bit. Paul wanted to guide the Corinthians to a higher level of spiritual understanding so he hoped to shock them with the truth of their failings. The fact is they had no business claiming some deep understanding of spiritual truths because they were stuck in spiritual infancy.

It's interesting that Paul makes a connection between a quarrelsome congregation and one that has not yet outgrown spiritual infancy. It suggests that one cause of jealousies and arguments within the community of God's people is that of spiritual immaturity. It is our responsibility to grow beyond the basic understandings of faith through the continual study of God's Word. Of course, individuals may be able to recite every element of Christian doctrine as easily as they recite the alphabet, but if such knowledge has had little personal impact, the results can be damaging. If an understanding of Christian doctrine remains only "head knowledge," then it consists of human wisdom and not spiritual wisdom. As Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 13:2: "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not

love, I am nothing." God's people are called on not only to learn the "solid food" of their faith, but to apply it to their relationships with one another and with their Lord.

The Corinthians' lack of spiritual maturity manifested itself most clearly in divisions between various spiritual leaders. With humble words, Paul reminded the Corinthians that neither he nor any other spiritual leader possessed importance on their own. Rather, each servant of Christ had been assigned a role in God's great plan of salvation. Every servant of the Lord merely performs the function which he or she has been given. In the case of Paul, the Lord assigned him to "sow the seed" of faith among the Corinthians. Paul was the apostle who first entered the Jewish synagogue in Corinth and announced that the long awaited Messiah had come in Jesus Christ. He was the one who continued to proclaim the basic Gospel of Jesus Christ in the house of Titius Justus.

When the Lord directed, Paul left Corinth and travelled to Ephesus for the purpose of sharing the Gospel with others. Even as Paul had been assigned to Corinth for a period of time, so Apollos was appointed to follow Paul

helping some of the Corinthian Christians learn more about their faith. So, Paul was like the farmer who sowed the seed, and Apollos was like the one who watered the seed. But, the most important factor is this: “Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” The personalities of Paul and Apollos and any other spiritual leader was not the important element in the saving of souls. It is God who brings the life of faith to individuals. It is not the spiritual leader. The spiritual leader is only the conduit through which the Lord creates new life.

Speaking as a pastor, it is both humbling and reassuring to hear these words from Paul. On the one hand, we recognize that God must do the work of conversion. No matter how sparkling the personality of a pastor, no matter how charming his manners, no matter how eloquent his preaching, he is not the one causing conversion. It is the Lord and He alone who performs that miracle. That is humbling reality! When a congregation decides to choose its pastor based on charisma or the ability to deliver a dynamic sermon, that congregation can quickly disintegrate once the magnetic leader is gone, demonstrating that the roots of faith may have been shallow all along.

By the same token, it is only our responsibility as Christian men and women to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That which results from our sharing is out of our control. We need not worry about it. How reassuring! Christians will encounter many

people who hear the Word of God and seem completely unaffected. That should not be a cause of personal discouragement. We are simply God’s tools to be used in the manner He wills. When we have spoken the message of salvation and demonstrated the joy of faith by the lives we lead, we have no further control over the souls of those we meet. Thank the Lord we can commend them to His gracious will!

And so, Paul depicts the Corinthian Church as being “God’s field,” or “God’s building.” The Church is built by God. And it is owned by God. Those who minister within the Church are merely God’s farmhands, or His construction workers, performing the roles to which they’ve been assigned. In fact, Paul goes on to describe himself as an expert builder whom God has used to construct the foundation of the church in Corinth. It isn’t as if Paul should be arrogant about his role. He was given the ability to construct a spiritual foundation “by the grace of God.” And he was only allowed to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. After Paul’s work was done, Apollos and others built on that foundation, but they, too, were required to build according to the Lord’s “specifications.”

Each builder must use the materials given by the Lord, the gold, silver and costly stones of pure doctrine and Christian living. When other materials are used — doctrines which are not sound or practices which are not in accordance with God’s will — it is as if cheaper materials such as wood, hay, or straw are being used to build God’s

Church. Naturally, such inferior materials will not last. They are not part of God's truth and will be shown as such on the Last Day. The work of some believers will stand the test while that of others will disappear. Those whose work remains will see the product of their work and be rewarded. Those whose work is destroyed may be saved by the personal faith they have been given, but their work will not last.

According to Paul's illustration, then, the Corinthian Christians make up God's building, or His temple. For Israel, the definition of the temple was the place where God was present. Thus, it makes sense that the Corinthian church should be God's temple because the Lord's Spirit dwelled in the hearts of its members. Since the Corinthian Christians made up God's temple, anyone who might cause disruption to that temple was in danger of being destroyed by God.

In the context of these early chapters, Paul is referring to those who were dividing the church by creating factions and quarrels. His warning should be taken seriously by each of us. If we act as a source of disruption and division within our congregation, we are not acting as the Lord's workers. We are instead destroying God's sacred temple. And we are putting ourselves in danger by struggling against the Lord.

Paul concludes this chapter by returning to his theme of human wisdom contrasted with spiritual wisdom. We only fool ourselves

when we judge ourselves according to the standards of our age. There are many people today who feel as if "living together" before marriage is the accepted practice of our time, so they feel no qualms about following current social mores while rejecting God's will. As a pastor who has nearly reached "middle age," I'm stunned at how God's design for marriage is simply being ignored today. The number of marriages I have performed involving a man and woman who have not already "lived together" could be counted on one hand. People are being blinded by the "standards of this age," as Paul would describe it. And we are blinded in so many ways.

We have been blinded to the reality of human life beginning at conception, condemning the unborn to the status of "human tissue" rather than unique and precious souls created by God.

We've convinced ourselves that using God's name in vain is an acceptable practice and should be promoted through our television, movies, and literature.

We've decided that the role of father and husband is rather unnecessary in this modern, sophisticated age, and have destroyed families in the name of "liberation" and "freedom."

We've ignored the Church of God, delegating it to some low or nonexistent priority while deciding it's more important for our children to attend soccer practice and baseball games.

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We've decided we can tolerate pornography in our homes and our culture because it is part of our natural instinct to lust after others.

In all these ways, we have fallen victim to the "standards of our age," and those who steadfastly proclaim the Lord's will are increasingly viewed as "weird" and "eccentric." In Paul's age as well as in our own, we who declare the will of God are considered "foolish" by the world. What we claim makes no sense. It goes against the consensus of society.

But who are truly the foolish ones? As Paul says, "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight." In other words, those who live by the standards of this world may mistakenly view Christians as "foolish" while the God of all creation views the social mores of our time as truly "foolish." This indicates the importance of continually studying God's Word. When we neglect His Word, we are easily persuaded by the mores of society. It's easy to believe something is right and good when everyone around us claims it is. It's easy to rationalize what we do when those around us are doing the same thing. The sad example of

the silence of most Christian churches in Nazi Germany towards the atrocities of the holocaust demonstrates how easily Christians can be swayed by the social mores of their time. True nobility can be found in defending that which is good and right when the world around us scoffs. A true child of God will defend God's will when everyone else is denying it.

We will suffer consequences when the world considers us "foolish" or "irrelevant" or "old fashioned" or even worse "dangerous." But Paul reminds us of some Old Testament truths. "He catches the wise in their craftiness" is one of Job's sayings (Job 5:13). "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile" is a saying from Psalm 94:11. Both statements record the fact that God's will and truth are eternal, whereas the social mores of our present age will be tossed into the dust bin of history.

Which means it is unnecessary to boast about the merits of one Christian leader over another. No matter who that person is, if he and we remain in the will and Word of God, then every blessing is ours because we are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

PERSONAL APPLICATION*1 CORINTHIANS 4:1–21*

Father of hope and salvation, we pray You would keep us linked to Your Word and will help us honor those to whom You have given spiritual authority so that we may imitate them and so follow the way of faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.

1. List how the following verses suggest we should regard the “servants of Christ and those entrusted with the secret things of God.” (4:1)

1 Corinthians 9:14

1 Timothy 5:17

2 Thessalonians 2:13

Hebrews 13:17

2. What is Paul’s attitude towards the “judgment” shown him by some of the Corinthians? (4:3)
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What does the Bible say about judging one another? (Matthew 7:1–2; James 4:11–12; Romans 14:10, 13)

Under what circumstances are Christians called on to “judge”? (1 Corinthians 5:9–13, 1 Corinthians 5:1–5; Philippians 3:2; 1 John 4:1; 2 John 1:10)

In your own words, when are Christians called upon to “judge” and when are they called on to refrain from judging?

3. Are we “right with God” just because we don’t have a guilty conscience? Why? (4:4; Psalm 19:12, 90:8)
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4. How do people violate the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written”? (4:6; 2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6–9; Colossians 2:18–19; 2 Timothy 2:16–18)

5. Why is it ridiculous to brag about our faith or our spiritual gifts? (John 3:27; Romans 12:6; Ephesians 2:8–10)

6. List the ways Paul has suffered for God’s Kingdom. (4:11–13; 2 Corinthians 11:23–33)

How has he followed Christ’s will by suffering so? (Matthew 5:38–47)

7. When will the Christian become a “king”? (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29–30; 1 Corinthians 6:2–3; Revelation 3:21)

Why was it premature for the Corinthian Christians to act as if they had already been enthroned? (4:8)

How was it evident to Paul that he had not yet entered the glory of the heavenly kingdom? (4:9)

8. How might Christians gain from “imitating” their spiritual leaders? (1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1; Philippians 3:17, 4:9)

9. How does Paul describe the kingdom of God in verse 20?

What question does Paul ask the Corinthian church in verse 21?