

12. The Corinthian church was marked by the principle of division that defines the natural man. The Edenic fall fractured the created order's unity and harmony (its *shalomic* state) at all levels and in every relationship. The universal flourishing that is *life* and *rest* was replaced by death: disorder, dysfunction and disintegration that are the necessary consequence of the creation's alienation from its Creator.

- Form always follows function, and so the creation reflects the Creator's *relational* purpose for it. The divine design was that the created order would flourish in intimate relationship with its Creator, drawing its life, order, prosperity, and harmony from Him. But the all-comprehending Creator-creature relationship is centered and administered in man, the unique creature who is the image and likeness of the Creator. In man the divine and the created are conjoined; in man the Creator established and orders His relationship with the works of His hands.
- Thus the intricate fabric of *inter-creational* relationship stands upon and reflects the *Creator-creature* relationship, and this, in turn, has its lifeblood in the relationship between God and man. This is why the fracturing of the divine-human relationship in Eden had creation-wide implications. The fracture that resulted was comprehensive: Man became estranged from God, which resulted in the creation's estrangement from Him. But beyond that, estrangement became the defining principle of creational existence, with men now being alienated from the natural world, from each other and even from their true selves.

This is why the principle of division defines man in his natural state. *Division defines every relationship of fallen man and so indicts them all as fraudulent.* Whether in relation to other men, to God, or even to themselves, human beings are left with no option but to regard utility and reciprocity (which are the way human dividedness relates to the "other," even if the other is oneself) as love – unless, of course, they are to deny altogether the notion of love.

- a. The natural man is a divided man, and this is the case regardless of whether his natural-mindedness is due to his lost and estranged condition or his failure, as a partaker in the new creation in Christ, to "put on the new man." So it was with the Corinthians. Paul recognized that all of their issues were merely symptoms of this fundamental problem: Whether factions, immorality, legal contentions, use of spiritual gifts or the administration of the sacraments, all reflected the dividedness – the "*me* versus *you*" – that is at the heart of natural (worldly) wisdom.

It wasn't that the Corinthians lacked the mind of Christ (2:16); the Spirit had joined them to Christ and made them sharers in His life. Moreover, their union with Christ meant their vital, ontological union with the triune God: Individually and as a body, the Corinthians were the sanctuary of the living God by virtue of the indwelling Spirit of Christ (3:16; cf. 6:15-20; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5). *The Corinthian problem was their effective denial of the mind of Christ*; for all their self-perceived maturity and insight, the truth was that they remained captivated by natural wisdom; they were living as if they were yet "mere men."

Paul's rebuke was as stinging as it was ironic: These who congratulated themselves that they were mature believers were in fact mere "babes in Christ." They weren't at all what they thought they were. Had they applied the mind of Christ to themselves and their attitudes and relationships they'd have seen this, but the eyes of fleshly wisdom presented to them an entirely different portrait; their natural minds assured them that they had much to exult in.

What made Paul's words all the more painful was the fact that the Corinthians – as Paul himself – understood that there had been a time when their infancy in Christ was entirely proper. They knew that in the early days of his ministry to them Paul had given them "milk" to drink because they weren't able to ingest and digest "solid food." But the Corinthians believed they had long since outgrown their infancy and become fully mature Christians – *men of such stature that they were even fit to sit in judgment of Paul and Christ's other apostolic servants* (cf. 1:12, 3:4ff, 9:1ff; also 2 Corinthians 10:1-13:10). Paul knew otherwise, and dashed their delusions: So far from being able to nurture others, they were themselves babes incapable of receiving solid food. They were yet operating out of natural minds unable to profit from the things of the Spirit (cf. 2:14-15, 3:1).

- b. Paul's proof of his assertion was the very issue at hand, namely the divisions and factions that existed among the Corinthian believers. Whatever may be a person's giftedness and knowledge (1:4-7), his natural-mindedness proves his immaturity, and division – in whatever form – is the hallmark of the natural mind (3:4).

Paul recognized that division was manifesting itself in the Corinthian church in a myriad of ways. Factions and contention were only its most blatant form, but that may well have been the reason Paul chose to address that particular issue first (1:10ff). As noted previously, factions are always formed and organized around particular people, teachings or ideologies, and so it was at Corinth. In their case, the matter of spiritual leadership provided the factionalizing incentive, particularly as it implicated apostolic authority in Christ's Church.

- The Church's authority resides in the word of Christ – the gospel that embodies the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3ff), and Jesus entrusted this gospel to His apostolic witnesses. Their role was to interpret and proclaim the "Christ event" (cf. John 15:26-27; Acts 1:1-8).
- The word of Christ was (and is) synonymous with the apostolic gospel: the good news of the kingdom of God now realized in Jesus Christ. But before that gospel was formally recorded in the New Testament scriptures, it was largely a matter of **oral** proclamation and instruction that carried the authority of Jesus' chosen apostles. Apostolic authority was attached to Christian proclamation and instruction, either because it came through the mouth of a recognized apostle (whether orally or through letters – ref. 2 Peter 3:14-16), or because the speaker/writer was an associate of the apostles and taught in conformity to the apostolic doctrine (ref. Acts 2:42).

In the first-century Church there was no formalized New Testament; *men* were the basis of gospel authority and truth, and thus it's not surprising that individual Christians and churches began to align themselves with certain apostolic figures. Obviously the objects of such allegiances were men who had a notable reputation or influential role with their followers; in the case of Corinth, several men had that sort of standing and those figures became the focal point of the Corinthian factions. There's no record of Peter traveling to Corinth, but the Christian communities outside Israel knew of Peter's prominence, both as a leader of the mother church in Jerusalem and as possessing a unique commission from the Lord Himself (cf. Matthew 16:13-19; John 21:15-17; Galatians 2:1-10). Paul and Apollos, on the other hand, had played significant roles in the life of the Corinthian church, and so Paul focused his discussion on the two of them (3:4ff).

- c. The core of Paul's argument was that, by aligning themselves with men, the Corinthians had fractured their essential unity and set themselves against one another. This was bad enough, but they were also drawing Paul and Apollos into their disunity so as to pit the two of them against each other. To align oneself with either Paul or Apollos (or someone else) is to imply that *those men* were divided.

But most importantly, the Corinthians were setting Paul or Apollos (or both) against *Christ* Himself. For if it were actually the case that either Paul or Apollos (or Cephas) was more worthy of deference and allegiance as a disciple of Jesus Christ, it follows that that particular individual was more closely aligned with Christ and His gospel. The very fact that the Corinthian believers were characterized by "I am of Paul" and "I am of Apollos" (3:4; cf. 1:12) showed that they regarded the two men as not equally faithful (or worthy) servants of Jesus Christ. That's the basis for the way Paul advanced his argument (3:5ff).

- d. The factions at Corinth implied that Paul and Apollos were to be distinguished in terms of their faithfulness or correctness in their ministry of the gospel. Paul acknowledged distinctions between him and Apollos, but not of the sort intimated by the Corinthian schism. Both men were equally servants of Christ – men He'd set apart for the *one cause* of the Corinthians' faith. They equally served that cause, but in different ways. Paul's ministry came first and was primary; Apollos' labors stood upon Paul's. They had played distinct roles in Corinth, but toward the same end. Thus neither man was more important, let alone more worthy of allegiance; both were necessary to the realization of the Lord's purposes (3:5). In making this case, Paul drew upon two illustrations: a *field* and a *building* (3:6-9).

Everyone recognizes that the goal of agricultural endeavors is the production of a fruitful harvest. And yet that outcome depends absolutely upon many different and distinct activities. Though some of those activities may appear more important than others, if any of them are neglected the harvest will be compromised, if not destroyed altogether. So planting the seed may seem to be the singularly important task, but the "ignoble" work of weeding and fertilizing is equally critical for securing the harvest.

So it is with Jesus' goal of reaping the harvest that is His Church. Obviously that work depends first upon "planting the seed" of the gospel in the soil of hearts prepared by Christ's Spirit. But implantation and germination are only the starting point. The harvest pertains to a *mature* crop: God's goal isn't delivering people from their guilt; it is perfecting the life and likeness of His Son in them. The goal of the triune God is the summing up of everything in the creation in Jesus Christ; as it pertains to human beings, this means that those who share in Jesus' life must "attain to the measure of the stature of the fullness which belongs to Christ." In terms of Paul's agricultural analogy, this outcome requires that the work of planting be followed by *watering* (3:6), and so God has given to His Church gifted men through whose labors the body of Christ will "grow up in all things into Him who is the Head" (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Paul reinforced this truth with his second analogy of constructing a building. Here, too, the goal is a completed endeavor whose fruition depends upon many distinct activities. The very nature of the building process dictates that it begin with the preparation of the ground on which the edifice is to stand (analogous to preparing the soil before planting seed). Once the ground is suitably prepared, the foundation must be properly laid. Only then can the laborers start building the superstructure, which itself must be constructed according to an orderly and staged process. The building isn't complete until the final touch is applied, and each aspect and phase of construction, though distinct, is united with the others in looking toward and contributing to that outcome. All of the individual pieces and processes are unified in looking ahead, but also in looking *back* – that is, in building in organic fashion upon what is already in place.

To the casual observer it may appear that Paul chose these analogies simply because they work well to make his point about the diverse role of various persons and gifts in the Church. *But anyone familiar with scriptural language immediately recognizes that Paul drew both analogies from biblical symbolism related to the people of God and their identity as a unified, organic community.*

- Paul's agricultural analogy – the Church as a field – ties most closely with God's description of Israel as a *vineyard*. In this metaphor God's people are depicted as a field which He has selected, prepared, planted with a choice vine, tended and protected, all with the expectation of a rich harvest. Toward that end He has appointed men to work in His vineyard on His behalf and present to Him its yield in its season (cf. Isaiah 3:13-15, 5:1-7 and Jeremiah 12:7-11 with Matthew 21:23-43 and John 15:1-8).
- The second analogy is primary and draws upon the idea of the people of God as His *sanctuary*. Paul wasn't envisioning a generic building, but the temple of God. This is the Scripture's elemental ecclesiastical motif, for it embodies the core reality of the kingdom of God (cf. Genesis 17:1-7; Exodus 25:1-8; Deuteronomy 7:1-21, 12:1-12; Psalm 46, 78:69; Isaiah 2:1-4; Ezekiel 43:1-12; 1 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 1:9-20, 21:1-22:5).