

It is something to be noted that the Corinthians, who boasted in their spiritual gifts and great knowledge should be rebuked by the great apostle. But when we consider the emphasis that Paul has made already in this book, we will understand it better. The Corinthians gloried in the wrong things—in the wisdom of the world and their skill in using it. Perhaps they boasted themselves against Paul, who taught with simplicity.

But in reality, they were not what they thought they were. And Paul diagnoses their problem and prescribes a cure for it.

There are two variations of the word “carnal” that is used in verses one and three. The first variation in verse one has no negative connotation. We do not blame a babe of a few days for lying in his crib and doing nothing but eat and sleep. He is acting a way a baby ought to act. It is certainly understandable that when Paul went to Corinth and introduced the Gospel there, people were not ready to receive anything but the truth in the most simple way.

The uses of carnal can be contrasted with the word “spiritual.” The word carnal in verse 3 is a different form of the word than that used in verse one and it carries a negative connotation with it. A baby ought to lie in his bed and eat and sleep, but a young man of twenty ought not to do that—he ought not to act like a baby acts. Just as the word perfect can have two nuances to it, as we saw last week, so can the word spiritual. Contrasted with the unbeliever, every Christian is perfect or spiritual. In this way the carnal person would be one who does not have the Holy Spirit and is unregenerate. The contrast is between life and death, and every Christian is alive in Christ.

But it is one thing to be alive and another thing to be lively. The first has to do with condition, the second with behavior. So a spiritual person might not act in a spiritual way. A perfect person might not act properly or maturely. One way of behavior when a person is new in Christ might be excusable; to continue to act this way is not excusable. A perfect baby will coo, and gurgle, and drool at the mouth; a perfect young man does not.

So “spiritual and perfect” may indicated that a person is a Christian, the words may also be used to described a Christian who is acting as a Christian. In the same way, carnal may indicated a person who is not a Christian, or it may indicate a Christian who is not acting as a Christian. Here, Paul is saying that the Corinthians were not acting like Christians. He calls them brethren, to take the edge off his rebuke, for he is not suggesting that they are not Christians, but that they are behaving badly.

What was their misbehavior? Strife, envy, and divisions. They were walking as if they were ordinary men, and not men who had been given the Spirit of Christ. Divisions and strife do not arise from the wisdom of God and from the Cross of Christ; they arise from the flesh.

Party spirit and contentiousness is well known among the unbelievers, but James tells us that it arises from the wisdom of the world. [chapter 3]. It is very common for young believers to become attached to one teacher or preacher. As believers grow in Christ they realize that they can be helped by many teachers in the church. The party strife will tend to decline as they grow in the Lord.

There are a couple of things that need to be said. 1. How we are to esteem the ministers of Christ; 2. The two figures that are used for the church.

- I. How we are to esteem the ministers of Christ. Calvin makes a most apt illustration here. He says ministers are like the sacraments. You can make too much of them. Rome makes too much of sacraments and ministers. They do not believe that a person can be saved without the priest and the sacrament. Some, like the Plymouth Brethren make too little of the sacraments and the ministers, thinking that we can do without them.
 - a. So on the one hand, when people make too much of the sacraments and the ministry, we remind them, as Paul does here, that the minister and the bread and the wine are nothing—nothing in themselves. The minister of the Gospel is just a man, a fallible and sinful human being, who will someday die. The bread is just bread that will decay and rot. The wine will turn sour and be unfit to drink. All things of the earth rust and decay away, so we are not to make too much of them. Who was Paul? A man who told you something that connected you to Christ. There was nothing special in Paul or in his manner that transformed you. The Gospel is not more effective in Paul than in Apollos, so you are silly to strive about who is the greatest. Paul is continuing a theme that he touched on in chapter two: if men do not believe the Gospel, the fault is in them. Corinth had good ministers: Paul, Apollos, etc. If they were carnal and acted like men, it was their own fault.
 - b. But on the other hand, when people make too little of the minister or the sacraments, we would remind them that this is the way that God has ordained that men hear and believe. He would humble us to have us taught by men like ourselves. The pagan world was constantly seeking the charismatic leader, the savior, the man filled with the gods. The Lord Jesus chose instead fishermen, tax collectors, and ordinary people to carry His message to the world, that the glory might be of God and not of men.
 - c. How are we to esteem the men who minister to us the gospel: very highly for their message’s sake, if they preach to us the true word of God. But we are not to esteem them so high that we will take poison from their hands. We are to esteem the sacraments for what God has promised, but we are not to esteem them so high that we might think they can replace the preaching and the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, as if there were something magical in them.

- II. In the Second Place, let us consider the two figures that Paul uses here for the church: a garden and a building.
 - a. Ye are God’s cultivated field. The church is God’s garden. Israel was called a vineyard by the prophets. A farming operation is complex and involves much labor. There is preparing the field, sowing the seed, watering and cultivating, harvesting and storing. Farmers’ work very hard, but the farm is the thing. The success of the farmer depends upon the production of the field, and that can come from God alone. The church is God’s field. It does not belong to the minister or to the officers. What is the fruit of the church: the fruit is the work of the Spirit, sown by the Scriptures, bringing forth love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith—this is the fruit that God require of His field, and the end of all His labor.

He that planted and he that watereth are one. What is more important, the watering or the planting. There are many operations, and if one of them fails everything fails. Each one has his job to do in the farming operation—but all is of God who owns the field, and the fruit is unto him. Each man will receive the reward of his labor, but that is another subject, which we will consider in a moment.
 - b. Ye are God’s building: a particular kind of building: the temple of the Lord.
 - i. Paul laid the foundation for the church at Corinth: he denied anything special but the grace of God given to him. He knew that others would build upon his labor.

- ii. There is no foundation for the church but Jesus Christ. Just as the only seed is the seed of the word of God, so there is no building material for the church except that which God has ordained.
- iii. Some men’s labor in the church is wood, hay, stubble; others build with gold, silver, precious stones. He is not talking about the physical building, but the precious things in the lives of the believers. Just as neglect of a field will cause weeds to grow; so we must be careful what materials we put into the church, the temple of God.
- iv. The day will declare: The day of the Lord, the judgment of the last day. At the last day the judgment of God will reveal whether God’s ministers built with precious things or with wood, hay, stubble. The issue here is not whether or not the minister is a true minister and is a saved man—all of those included here are saved men and true ministers, but it is the work that they do that is under consideration. It is possible to be a true minister and do some building that does not meet the test of the judgment of God.
- v. The laborer is worthy of his hire, and faithful ministers will be blessed of God: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant....”
- c. But there is a very special warning given concerning the temple of God. This passage is not speaking of your physical body as being a temple of the Holy Ghost; that is spoken of in I Cor. 6. The context here demands that we look at this passage as referring to the church. The church is the temple of God and a special warning is given to those who would defile it.
 - i. The temple of God belongs to God. Don’t become servants of men. The church must never be prostituted to the service of Paul, Apollos, or any other man. It is God who is to be worshipped.
 - ii. The church must never be used as a device to advance the ambitions and the goals of power, wealth, fame, or political faction.
 - iii. The church must never be used as a means of preying on the wealth, the souls, the bodies of people—to be used to gain access to wealth; to the gratification of lust; to build a name and reputation, as a stepping stone to entertainment and worldly ambition.
 - iv. There is a difference between building unwisely and polluting the temple. “If any man” not just the ministers—God is very jealous of His temple. Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire: they brought alien fire into the temple. The Gospel does not need our embellishments. It doesn’t need to be jazzed up. It does not need to be livened up with the enthusiasm of the flesh. Our prayers do not become more effective if they are repeated over and over, or if we cut the flesh, as if the energy of the flesh would enhance the Gospel of Christ.
 - v. There is a beautiful figure in I Peter. We are living stones making up a living building. The purpose for this building is to offer spiritual sacrifices: 1 Peter 2:5 Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.
 - vi. Why do you come to church? Why do we do what we do: it all is for the purpose of offering spiritual sacrifices to God. Why do I preach: because I want you to know what God requires of you and me? So that the church will be acceptable to God. So that our worship is received and blessed of God. The size of the church has nothing to do with the quality of the worship.
 - vii. Evangelism is to what? What are we calling men to, if it is not to the worship of the true God. To the ministry of the word; to the sacraments; to obedience in body and soul.

- viii. Ye are the temple of God: there is something besides what goes on in your heart, and that is what goes on in the assembly of God’s people—in the holy convocation. Beware what sort of sacrifices you offer there.