

Week 3, 1 Corinthians 3

Hook



Main Point: Spiritual growth and unity is found in God alone.

Current Event: The 2016 presidential election campaigns have been among the most polarizing in American history. In May 2016, it was determined that both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump had the highest un-favorability ratings ever among presidential candidates in U.S. history.¹ According to a poll by Reuters, many Americans are simply casting “anti-votes” on both sides: “Nearly half of American voters who support either Democrat Hillary Clinton or Republican Donald Trump for the White House said they will mainly be trying to block the other side from winning.”² As Reuters points out, this is essentially “the world’s biggest un-popularity contest.”

What aspects of presidential elections produce unity in America? What aspects of presidential elections produce division in America?

In your opinion, which presidential election caused the most division among Americans? What lasting effects did that campaigns cause?

Transition: Today’s lesson will examine the role of leaders within the church and the dangers of elevating them too highly.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carbonatedtv/why-are-our-presidential-_b_9915682.html.

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-anti-vote-idUSKCN0XX06E>.

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Main Point: Spiritual growth and unity is found in God alone.

Text Summary: While the Corinthians may claim grand spiritual experiences, the divisions among them reveal that, much to their surprise, they are not nearly as mature as they think they are.³ The reason for their stunted spiritual growth is that they have boasted in themselves and their local leaders as their source of maturity instead of God Himself. Paul is reminding them in chapter 3 that while all believers co-labor to build up God's temple, God is the source of all growth and wisdom. Since God is the true source of growth, none can boast about the effects of his ministry work. In a culture where bragging about personal achievement is the norm, this exhortation is not what the Corinthians expect. These believers desperately need to be realigned with the true source of growth in order to last in their spiritual journey. Paul's ultimate desire is for these believers to cease identifying their progress by the local tribe of Christians they belong to, and instead identify God in Christ as their only hope for spiritual maturity.

1 Corinthians 3:1–9 [Read]

Sub-point: Growth in Christ is the result of God's work in a believer's life.

The start of chapter 3 significantly parallels the start of 2:1–5 as seen in last week's study.⁴ To recall, Paul provides an example in 2:1–5 of what power and wisdom from God produces in the life of a believer: humility, weakness and simplicity. However, in 3:1–4, Paul reveals a stark contrast between that type of character and the character of the Corinthians, which is marked by envy and division.

In providing this sharp contrast, Paul is exposing a harsh reality: While the desire for spiritual growth is a good thing, the Corinthian believers are drawing from the wrong source to achieve it.⁵

These believers have bought into the meritocratic ideas of Corinthian culture—that is, to have an ever-growing reputation of being wise, rhetorically savvy, and connected to the best leaders.⁶ Much like the world today, Corinthians were obsessed with what we would now call *self-help* or *personal progress*. Growing their personal portfolios in order to rise above their

³ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 40.

⁴ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 96.

⁵ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 53-54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

peers was always on the mind of Corinthians—be it in areas or “tribes” of wisdom, finance, spirituality or influence. And to grow above their peers meant they had to connect to the experts, the leaders, in these “tribes.” Much like the American habit of name-dropping, in Corinth, being connected to a tribe’s leader provided a personal sense of progress, worth and maturity.⁷

Because of these cultural growth ideals, the Corinthian believers assumed Christian maturity worked the same way as everything else in their society—simply connect your name with the local tribal expert and everyone will consider you mature.

In verse 5, Paul turns this ideal upside down and forces the Corinthian believers to do some soul-searching by asking diagnostic questions.⁸ *What is Apollos? What is Paul?* By asking *what* instead of *who*, Paul depersonalizes Christian leaders and makes a striking point: the local influencers of the Christian tribe are simply instruments in the True Grower’s hands.⁹ Or said another way, when you are starving for water, it makes no sense to focus all your attention on the *receptacle* you’re drinking out of when it’s the *water* that provides life.¹⁰ Leaders are simply receptacles of God’s power and wisdom, and as such, they should work heartily in ministry. However, their influence is not the true source of spiritual growth, God Himself is.

Considering Corinthian ideals, why would being labeled an infant in verse 1 be offensive to these believers?

Paul claims that the Corinthian church is immature. On what observation about the Corinthian community does he base this claim in verse 3?

In verses 6–8, how does Paul teach about unity among believers instead of competition?

What cultural ideals have been imposed on Christianity in the American Church today?

1 Corinthians 3:10–23 [Read]

Sub-point: God is the One who grows the Church.

The Corinthians meet in the homes of different leaders and sit under the instruction of different teachers, which has unnecessarily created divisions among them. As usual in Corinthian culture, the loyalty of the Corinthian believers is deeply tied to their local influencer. However, Paul

⁷ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56

desires them to see that while they meet in different places and learn from different leaders, they all belong to *one* grand household—God’s.¹¹

Verses 16–17 show us that God Himself is building a temple to dwell in—the body of Christ in Corinth. He is the One who grows this church body, and the part of the believer and the leader alike is to co-labor with God to see His plan come to fruition.

In keeping with a building metaphor, Paul reminds these Christians that building a temple requires a solid foundation. Verse 11 reveals what the foundation is: the work of Jesus Christ Himself. Paul shares in verse 10 that he had laid that foundation; he had preached the Cross in Corinth.

Paul sternly warns the Corinthians not to build the church according to the wisdom of their culture, but instead according to the “meaty, sustaining realities of the Gospel.”¹² According to verses 12–15, any work done on God’s temple project that is not in line with the Gospel foundation is doomed.¹³ In other words, if personal and corporate growth in the Corinthian church is built on anything but God’s power in Christ, it will not last (wood, hay and straw). Work done in the power of Christ will last and be rewarded (gold, silver and precious stones). Eventually, as seen in verses 15, any growth that relies on human influence or worldly success will give out and be proven false in the end. The “reward” in verse 14 and the “loss” in verse 15 refer to the judgment that each believer will one day face; not a judgment concerning condemnation or admittance into heaven, but instead concerning their works on earth for God’s kingdom (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10). This judgment is referred to as “Day” in verse 13. Although the “reward” and “loss” are not detailed in these verses, the fact that the believer will be “saved” reminds the reader that the one who places his faith in Christ is secure. The use of the word “fire” in connection with the coming of Christ is also seen in 2 Thessalonians 1:7 and Revelation 18:8.¹⁴

Verses 16 and 17 remind the Corinthians that they, a church, are God’s temple and one who attempts to destroy that temple will reap consequences. Taylor writes, “The reason that God’s judgment comes to those who profane the temple is simple: ‘God’s temple is sacred.’”¹⁵ Taylor writes that in context, destroying the temple refers to divisions. The temple imagery links the Church with the Spirit. In 3:17, Paul uses this term to show the Corinthians that as the people of God, they are God’s temple. With this context, the one who comes against God’s people is coming against God himself, since His Spirit lives within His people. To this end, those who

¹¹ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 42.

¹² Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 57.

¹³ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 43.

¹⁴ David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 512.

¹⁵ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 109.

come against God are, as a default, God's enemies. We know from the Scripture that God will permanently vanquish His enemies. His enemies will not stand. Not only will the one who comes against God's people be in isolation, this enemy will ultimately lose the fight against the Almighty.

Paul's concluding exhortation in verses 18–23 circles back to arguments about wisdom. Paul again reminds the believers that the true way to wisdom and growth is upside-down compared to the Corinthian way. Corinthian ideals lead these believers to think that boasting in their own wisdom or the wisdom of their leaders will result in spiritual progress, but Paul reminds them that boasting in God's wisdom and work alone is the true way to grow. So, for the one who has considered himself "wise" according to the ways of Corinth, he must turn his back on this "wisdom" so that he may be a recipient of God's wisdom (to the world he would look like a "fool").

Because men are foolish, do not boast in them. This carries over into the work of wonderful, dedicated ministers like Paul, Apollos and Cephas (Peter); bragging about men who are leaders is done out of an arrogant spirit. Instead of boasting about men, the Corinthians should boast in God. God has given all things (including the ministers listed) for the benefit of the Church, which is Christ's, who is God's. Everything belongs to Him.

In verse 10, Paul says he laid a foundation in the Corinthian church according to what?

How does Matthew 25:14–30 help us better understand 1 Corinthians 3: 12–14?

How does someone show a leader honor without "boasting" in him?

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Took



Main Point: Spiritual growth and unity is found in God alone.

Historical Event: On June 16, 1858, Abraham Lincoln gave a speech upon accepting the Illinois Republican Party's nomination as that state's United States senator. Along with the Gettysburg Address, this became one of the best-known speeches of Lincoln's career. The best-known passage of the speech is:

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.¹⁶

A nation divided against itself cannot stand. A church divided against itself cannot stand. A Bible Fellowship divided against itself cannot stand. We cannot allow jealousy and quarreling in the church to disrupt our service to God and the spreading of the Gospel. If we want to mature in Christ, we will fully surrender our lives to God and avoid giving our loyalties to men, who are merely coworkers in service to God.

Lesson Conclusion: Many believers today try to prove their maturity in Christ based on certain leaders or networks they are associated with. Doing this not only divides the body of believers instead of unifying it, but takes the glory away from God as our ultimate sanctifier. While gleaning from particular pastors, leaders or networks can help believers in their endeavor to know God, ultimately, following God in Christ is the only proper source of growth.¹⁷ We, too, must ask ourselves these diagnostic questions about where we find our source for maturity and unity, and assess if we are spiritual infants divided by tribes, or spiritual adults united by our common foundation of Christ and His Gospel.

Challenge:

¹⁶ <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/house.htm>.

¹⁷ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 55.

Take a break. If you are guilty of only listening to certain pastors or podcast heroes, take a break from listening to them this week. Become cognizant of how many times you mention them this month. Dedicate yourself this week to immersing yourself in the Scriptures only.

Repair divisions. The goal of this admonishment from Paul was not just to harp on the divided Corinthians, but to give them motivation to restore unity among their separate tribes. In which current personal or church relationship are you experiencing divisions? How is this division holding you back from maturity in Christ? Make a plan to reunify with that person this week based on Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18:15–20.

Repent of jealousy. Jealousy is one of the key markers of immaturity and church division according to Paul. Of whom are you jealous in this season of your life? Why? What does that reveal about your view of God? Take time to journal or pray about the jealousy that is stifling your growth, and return to the love of the Father for restoration.

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