

# **Milk, Diapers, and What Happens When Christians Don't Grow Up**

## **1 Corinthians 3:1-5**

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We have completed two chapters of 1 Corinthians and today we start chapter 3. What we have learned so far is that in spite of the spiritual privileges the Corinthian church had in Christ, they seemed more interested in Corinth than in Christ. They were thinking and acting like the culture around them and dragging those attitudes into the church. Paul reminds them that real wisdom is not in the wisdom or philosophy found in Corinth but the wisdom of God found in the cross. The natural man doesn't see it this way. The gospel and the claims of Christianity rub the natural man the wrong way and always will unless the Spirit of God gives him spiritual understanding. Only then will the natural man discern in the gospel the wisdom of God and put his faith in Christ. The Spirit's necessary role shows that salvation is completely from God. For this we will be eternally thankful. That's chapters 1-2.

We told you at the beginning that the Corinthian church was the most messed up of all churches. Starting with chapter 3, Paul drops the theological pleasantries and boldly confronts the mega-problems in the church. I'll warn you, it's not pretty. It is a little like watching video footage of a high speed chase from those news choppers. You know that if it made it on the national news, something bad is about to happen. But you watch anyway. Reading Corinthians is like that. Ready for the crash?

*But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh...*  
(1 Corinthians 3:1)

Paul brings down the hammer. He does it in love. He first refers to them as "brothers" ("sisters" is inferred). "Brothers" in Scripture is a term for fellow Christians. Dustin and Lindsey Rouse are from the South. Dustin's dad is a pastor and he was telling me this week that in his dad's church, they call each other *Brother so and so*. Let's try it. Turn to the person next to you and say, *Good morning, brother (or sister)*. Doesn't that feel good? It's important to see his heart here. He loves these people. He spent a year and a half with them getting the church going. He prays constantly for them; he wants them to be blessed in every way, which is why he says what he does.

### **Characteristics of Corinthian Christianity**

*But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?*  
(1 Corinthians 3:1-4)

In verse 15, Paul has just described the spiritually alive person. They have the Spirit of God, they have understanding, they have discernment, and they have the mind of Christ. The problem in the Corinthian church is that they aren't at all living like it. In chapter 1 he sketched some of the problem, *It has been reported to me...that there is quarrelling among you* (1:11). He is going to go on in the letter to address sexual sin, lawsuits among

members of the church, general lack of love, theological error, and more. *Corinthians, you have the Holy Spirit, but you sure aren't acting like it.*

This is a situation begging for a metaphor and Paul gives them one that everyone can relate to – babies. It doesn't matter what culture, what millennium, what ethnicity, babies everywhere act like babies. We all generally understand how babies act. One description of a baby is *a digestion canal with a loud voice on one end and no responsibility at the other.* Parents of infants are probably "amening." When babies **fuss**, we understand that this is what babies do. I did it. You did it. It's part of being a baby. Babies need to be **fed milk**. This may be from their mother or a bottle. You don't feed a baby the Thanksgiving turkey meal; you'll regret it. Babies also have **major interpersonal issues**. They bite each other. They hit each other. Babies in the church nursery rarely display compassion for the other babies like, *Oh change her first, she needs it.* They are selfish! When those needs aren't met, they scream. It's a good thing God made them so adorable. We love them and put up with them because they are babies.

### **Chronic spiritual immaturity**

*But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.* (1 Corinthians 3:1)

Paul carries over the "spiritual people" theme from verse 15. Spiritual people could also be called, "Christians as they should be." Growing; maturing. We call this progressive sanctification. It is a serious error to think that becoming a Christian is the end of the story. We have been dealing with some pastoral situations that look like that to me. These are people, who in their past had some kind of apparent conversion, but who seem to have little interest in expressing that presently in their lives. The kind of faith that saves is an all-encompassing life transformation and that transformation continues for the rest of your life. If not, you converted to something, but it wasn't real Christianity.

This doesn't happen all at once. When Paul was with them, they were all new Christians. That's why he says, *I could not talk to you as spiritually mature but as spiritually immature.* That's what you were, "people of the flesh." This word "flesh" is an important word and concept in the New Testament. When Paul uses it he normally means "unredeemed humanity" or "the values and mindset of the world."

- *...among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.* (Ephesians 2:3, emphasis added)
- *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.* (Galatians 5:16, emphasis added)

When we become a Christian, we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are spiritually alive for the first time. However, this inward inclination toward sin is still with us. The flesh is more than our physical bodies; it is that part of us that delights in sin, wants it and fights against God's good work in us. We battle this until we die. If you didn't fight it this week, you are either a hedonist or you are dead.

What was going on in Corinth was that these Christians were chronically living and acting and thinking like people dominated by the flesh. If there was ever a city given to the flesh, it was Corinth. You could call Corinthians "Fleshorinthians." It is normal for a new Christian to still have old habits of sin. However, those will begin to change and the new life in Christ

begins to take control. But when someone has been a Christian for quite awhile and they are still living like a brand new Christian, this is a serious problem!

And that is what was going on in the Corinthian church. They hadn't spiritually grown up. The church was like one giant spiritual nursery filled with spiritual babies. That is what Paul calls them. He says, *You were infants in Christ and you still are!* The word there for "infants" is not a nice word for "cute little baby." It's more like "crybabies." *You are acting like a room full of crybabies! Corinthians, you need to grow up!*

Growing up means growing by the Spirit in a direction of life that increasingly reflects the attitudes and actions of Jesus. Healthy babies grow and all healthy Christians do as well. But not in Corinth. They were chronically immature! This has nothing to do with their age. Age doesn't equal spiritual maturity. Some young people are far more spiritually mature than some Christians who have been Christians for a long time.

Imagine visiting a crybaby church and you could see with special glasses that see spiritual maturity. As you look around, there goes Mr. Jones, the longtime member, in a diaper. Mrs. Smith goes by and you see her sucking a bottle. A few members are verbally biting each other in the foyer. There is tug-of-war between two others in the church office over who is in charge. Someone walks by and you just smell something. Everywhere else you look, there are adult men and women on the floor having hissy fits. Sound like a church you've been to? Then you've been to First Corinthian Church. They were adults chronologically, but they were children spiritually.

Part of the problem was....

### **Stunted growth in understanding**

*I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh.* (I Corinthians 3:2-3a)

The imagery here is a little disturbing. Does it seem weird at all for a child to want milk from his or her mother? No. That's completely natural. What if you saw a grown man bottle or breast feeding from his mother in the nursery? That would indicate a serious problem.

That's what Paul says. *When I was there, I fed you milk.* "Milk" is an analogy to a level of teaching that corresponds to a new Christian's ability to understand. When someone becomes a Christian here, we don't immediately try to teach them advanced theology. We start with the basics.

For example, I have two books here by the same author. Both are by John Stott, a personal favorite author of mine. The one book is *Basic Christianity*. The other book is one of the more exhaustive studies of the Cross and atonement that I have come across entitled *The Cross of Christ*. Which do you think we give to a new Christian? *Basic Christianity*. It's milk. Milk is great for a baby Christian. The goal is to ground the new Christian's understanding on the basics and then to move them along to more mature understanding. If the new Christian says, "I want to just keep rereading *Basic Christianity* over and over again," you should be asking, "Why? Why would you keep drinking milk? Don't you realize how much better a Porterhouse steak tastes? Milk's good, but meat is better."

Here is the issue. It's not so much the level of teaching, but the Corinthians' lack of desire for it. Corinth had great teachers! Paul. Apollos. Others. What this church didn't have was a healthy appetite for truth or the growth God's truth brings.

The writer of Hebrews makes the same point. *About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 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, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.* (Hebrews 5:11-14)

Children need to be weaned off of milk or it will put their lives at risk. My dear friend, have you been a Christian awhile? Are you still on the bottle? Are you still at a milk level of growth? Look inwardly right now. What's going on as God's Word is taught? Are you into it? Are you eager to learn and grow? What's going on right now? Is there a desire for the meat of God's Word and truth? This is the tragedy of the modern American church where pastors can get away with doctrinally shallow messages because that's all their chronically immature members want or expect.

I was going to minister at a church years ago that had a bit of reputation for superficial Christianity and my mentor said to me, "Don't worry Steve, they'll think you're Spurgeon." What he meant by that was no compliment to the depth of my sermon, but a statement on superficiality of the Christianity at the church. When a church's teaching ministry keeps feeding its people milk and doesn't teach sound doctrine and doesn't challenge them to grow, it entrenches immaturity in the church.

What about Bethel Church? We have people here across the maturity spectrum. Some of that is really great as we have new Christians who are excited and growing but just haven't matured yet; some day they will. Paul takes no issues with new Christians. It's the old Christians who aren't maturing Christians. It's diaper-wearing, milk-loving, content-to-stay-in-the-nursery Christians that Paul is writing about. Where are you?

Here's what we can know. We need to cultivate in our hearts the desire for more and more growth in understanding of truth and more and more consistent application of it. The weekend sermon is part of that but it really comes down to a lifestyle of feeding on God's Word. How about taking a class we offer? We have ongoing classes on doctrine and practical Christianity – *How to study the Bible, Christian Parenting, etc.*

Have you taken one? Have you thought about it? If not, why not? These are great opportunities to grow. It would seem to me that healthy Christians would flock to the opportunity to understand faith and life on a meatier level. Imagine how many might show up for a free Porterhouse steak night. Shouldn't we crave spiritual meat even more? Why not take a class or read a challenging Christian book - we have many recommended reads in the Bookstore. Recommit to regular personal Bible study, listen to sermons. What a day we live in! You can download or podcast every week the best preachers in the world! There are so many opportunities available to grow and healthy Christians will take advantage of it.

The clearest example of the Corinthians' immaturity becomes a major theme the rest of the way. We'll just get into it here. The church was being ripped apart by rivalry and divisiveness.

### **Interpersonal rivalry and division**

*For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? (I Corinthians 3:3b-4)*

This problem was introduced in 1:10ff. There it says that there was actually quarrelling in the church! About what, the color of the carpet? Whether or not to have a hat rack? It was about church leaders and teachers. The people were lining up behind their favorite leader and actually identifying themselves as followers of Paul or followers of Peter or followers of Apollos. In other words, they were putting these guys up on pedestals and finding their identity in them.

In today's leadership model, this would be admired. We just got through with an election where people were identifying themselves with political leaders by waving signs, wearing buttons, putting bumper stickers on their car, every one of those saying, *I am a follower of \_\_\_\_\_*. The one who gets the most people to follow them is called the election winner and can look forward to schools being named after him or her.

Spiritual leadership is completely different and God's people need to realize it. The role of the spiritual leader is not to convince people to follow them. Rather, spiritual leaders in the church are seeking to convince people to find their identity in Christ and to follow Him. The problem was so bad at Corinth that there were actually the equivalent of gangs in the church. They exhibited harsh jealousy toward one another. There were power struggles and division. Paul is going to rebuke them and we'll get to that next week.

Here's the thing to realize about how spiritual immaturity relates to this. A great indication of a person's relationship with God is the way they relate to other people. In other words, our interpersonal relationships are the context where our level of spiritual maturity is on display. An immature Christian will be prickly, fussy, bite those around him, refuse to share himself with others, and is easily upset.

But as a new Christian moves from a milk understanding to a meat maturity, the truth of God's unmerited grace enriches your heart, the infinite gap between me and a holy God works its way into your understanding, the unspeakable love of God to bridge the sin gap with the death of the Son of God humbles you, the glory of Christ's victory over death encourages you, and the gift of God for eternal life creates a wonder within. Oh what a difference maturity makes in the way I relate to people in the church, in my home, in my community!

A church with humble, spiritually growing Christians is the best place on earth! They are marked by unity, love, mutual respect, and there is only one pedestal in the church. The members line up behind Christ, who is not just on a pedestal, but on the throne of heaven and the throne of our hearts.

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