

Belonging to Christ, Corinthians 3:1-23

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Introduction

Our theme this year of recognizing and solving problems in a Biblical way, brings us back several times to Paul's two letters to the Corinthian Church. The Corinthians had most every kind of problem that has ever plagued a church. Today's text describes that Christians resort to fleshly, worldly, merely human thinking. Paul then points to a symptom; even Christians rally around personalities and split into hostile camps.

Paul is saying that factions rise up out of the flesh and are a symptom of sin. If we want to know whether this still applies all we have to do is follow the news during an election cycle, and we see fleshly, worldly thinking at its worst. I belong to this candidate, but if you are for that other candidate you are a jerk, you are ignorant, you might be a traitor, you might even be evil. Some candidates have pandered to this fleshly partisanship with its ugly comments, gossip and untruths more than others.

It is easy to get pulled into that, because nothing is easier than thinking and acting in the flesh. Sin is easy! Let me say two things. First, Christians are not to trust the boasts of candidates in the same measure that we trust the promises of God. Friends, we know that elected officials in their humanity will let us down. Let's stop pretending anything else is true even during primary season. That is all I am going to say about the election, at least today. Second, Christians are not to bring the mud-slinging, fleshly, partisan attitude with them into the church. This second statement is the message of today's sermon: We are not to think about church: its leadership, personalities, stewardship and ministry needs, in the fleshly way that is done in the world. The

witness of the Church and the work of God's Kingdom never hangs on the charisma of a pastor or the votes of a faction. If we think they do, then as Paul writes, we are behaving as mere infants in Christ, as fleshly and not spiritual, and whatever we get going based on those worldly values will not endure the judgment, but will be consumed in fire.

Let us pray: Lord God, we need more of your Spirit, we need more of your Mind. Fill us with your Spirit and teach us to think as you do and live into Christ. In Jesus' name, amen.

1. Worldliness

In my study I was pointed to a helpful graphic designed by Campus Crusade to show the three spiritual states of a human being. The first is the natural state, in which Jesus Christ is not part of life. The center of that person's life might be one's own ego with its ambitions, or it might be faith given over to a false religion, or it might be something else like the need to please parents or a spouse or to serve a flag or some cause.

The second is the carnal state, in which a person has accepted Jesus Christ into their life, but has not allowed Christ to take charge. It might be that what had been on the throne before remains on the throne, but we think we have baptized it by giving a nod to Christ. In the carnal state the person calling oneself a Christian shows little of the power or the fruit associated with a life devoted to God. This is the state of the Corinthians as Paul has to treat them as worldly people -mere infants in Christ.

The third state is the spiritual state. The person has put Christ on the throne of life, expects Christ to be in charge, and desires to be united with Christ in his will and in his purpose. Then, as stated in Romans 12, one's life becomes renewed by the transformation of the mind, and becomes a living sacrifice, a testimony to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in our speech, our actions, and our priorities as we do his good and perfect and pleasing will.

Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians because they have received Christ and even experienced spiritual power, but they have lived in their orientation to the flesh. Christ has not been in charge among them. The specific problem addressed by Paul is the way in which the Corinthians, instead of letting Christ govern their lives as spiritual people, began to identify themselves by their favorite teachers and preachers. This, to Paul, is a sure fruit not of the spirit, but of the flesh. Paul states, “For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere human beings?” Christians are called to be more than driven by carnal, worldly views, we are called to be spiritually-minded, spiritually guided witnesses to grace in Christ. The flesh inspires loyalty, but of the wrong kind, which is proven in arguments and factions.

Today we see, not only in the United States but in many churches around the world, especially the biggest ones, that they are driven by one pastor’s large personality. Myriads of smaller churches have wished they could be led by pastors with such magnetic charisma; it is a lingering but false notion that the preachers make the church. We have seen too many times when these big churches were not able to pass on the mantle of leadership in healthy ways, and maybe there was too much confusion about who was really in charge. It must be Jesus Christ.

2. Worthiness

If we want crowns in heaven for our work here, we build on the foundation of Jesus Christ alone. The worthiness of our work will depend on whether it was motivated by God’s mind for redemption, or our own for our ambitions. If I choose the flesh, if I want to wear a crown here, and make what I do with my life and my work part of my own glory, all of that will burn up around me as I stand before Christ. I’ll be in heaven, that’s true, but I will smell like the smoke of hell.

Many religious leaders have used their own charisma to persuade others to follow them in flesh rather than to look through them, past them, beyond them and above them, to Jesus Christ. The worldly manner of holding power over people is a short-cut to do some impressive things, but look around the world: The pyramids of Egypt were built by idolaters. Stonehenge was raised by pagans. An enormous church with its own atrium and bookstore and cafeteria is surely impressive. If those things are done, let them be done because those things were in Christ's mind to do, otherwise they perish like any other mall, or any other concert arena.

If factions and worldly thinking are a problem here at Elgin Covenant, let us address it, repent and return to our focus: This church belongs to Christ and does not depend on any one person or group of people and their ideas about what should be done. It does not depend on me: Some of you might think it does. It doesn't. It does not depend on Pastor Greg. Some of you might think it does. It doesn't. It does not depend on the council, Sunday School, the choir, the praise team, the dollar dinner, the kids, the seniors, a ministry at present or a ministry in the future. Some of you might think so about this or that. It doesn't hang on any one of these.

When we hang our hopes on a personality or a specific ministry, two problems arise: First, we lose sight of where our trust belongs: in Jesus Christ. A thriving church hangs onto the priorities preached and taught and lived by Jesus Christ. We know because we read the scriptures that it is the mind of Christ to raise up and equip preachers, and to teach children the way they should go, and to minister to the widows in their need for community, and to disciple youth toward a maturity that no one ought to despise. By godly thinking and spiritual obedience, all of these things will happen in ways that raise the church's redemptive value in the Kingdom of God.

The second problem when worldly thinking takes over, is that I begin to think it all depends on me, that I'm the glue of the church. Then I get all prickly and envious and defensive when I hear other people say that someone else or something else is the glue. Suddenly the conversation changes from being about God's church, to being about US vs. THEM as we fight over "our" church in factions gathered around one or two priorities or personalities. It's not true of any of us or any one thing we do that the church lives or dies by it. If any of us think that way, let us repent of being carnal instead of Christlike. If we act as worldly people and divide ourselves over the very things that should unite us, then the things we do out of strife and ambition will have no redemptive value. They will be consumed in fire.

3. Wisdom

The wisdom of the world is based on the senses, the appetites, and the instincts. This worldly wisdom is what drives us to do things in our own strength, to gather in defensive groups of the like-minded, to put our hopes in those who boast the most about themselves. In the Bible, Wisdom always has its source in God. Wisdom is rooted in the faith that what God has revealed in Christ, through the prophets, through the apostles, and preserved in the Old and New Testaments, is true. Wisdom is rooted in our faith that what the scriptures reveal to us about God's will for our lives and plan for our future, are the best promises that can be had. This wisdom need not ever be exchanged for the wisdom touted by a strong personality, whose promises cannot compare with the promises of God.

When the mind of Christ is head of the church, then it is wisdom that governs the church. This is not the wisdom of the flesh, but of the Spirit. In the wisdom of the flesh we fear the economy of the world. We divide into factions over how to split up the income. In the wisdom of

the Spirit we celebrate the economy of God. We invest ourselves and our treasures into the redemptive movement of God's Spirit moving through us and into the world.

If our ministries spring from the mind of Christ, and our work is done in his power, we become one body with many features. Paul picks up this image later in his letter. In his image of the builder in today's text, the ministries that come out of the power and priorities of Christ will become for us priceless treasures in heaven, for we are investing in the things that are golden, the things that are precious. In the mind of Christ, these are always the things that carry redemptive value. By involving ourselves in them, we spread salt and light into the lives that our ministry touches.

The height of foolishness, on the other hand, is to resort to factions and to treat the church as though it were a worldly democracy, with different factions pushing their agendas at the specific expense of other agendas and priorities. When this happens we work at cross-purposes. When people belong to the same church but do not feel like they are on the same team, this is the outcome of what Paul describes: Infantile thinking, worldly, carnal ideas about the way things need to run. Then people ask questions like: Where is the vision?

Friends, here is your vision. Here is your sign. Here is what the Church needs to do and to be: we need to be Jesus, his Body of Christ in the world, proclaiming his death for sins until he comes again. As his followers, Jesus promised us a cross here for a crown in heaven. That is the divine economy. It does not work any other way, it will not work any other way, at least not in any way that will matter for eternity.

We might thrive for a time in certain worldly ways with charismatic personalities and worldly priorities, that is true. But it is much better to thrive spiritually and redemptively with Christ as our head, sowing the gospel in spiritual power and harvesting spiritual fruit. That is

what we teach and preach and pursue here as we seek to be God's instruments for redemption in our world.

Conclusion

The problem Paul describes in First Corinthians 3 has plagued Christians all over the world into our generation: It is the carnal way of thinking, the flesh-oriented way of thinking, which divides people instead of bringing us together. The solution to this problem is provided: To repent and put Christ in charge of one's own life including one's own mind, the way we think about things and people and priorities for life and ministry. Then Christ will take charge of the church. Christ will bring power and fruit as we live and serve him for his sake, carrying the crosses that are required, as we look forward to living and reigning with him forever. Amen.