

Epiphany 6 / February 12, 2023

1 Corinthians 3:9

“For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”

Paul began this letter thanking God that the Corinthians were not “lacking any spiritual gift.” They were spiritually blessed, but they were using their spiritual gifts for fleshly purposes to exalt themselves and demean others. So, he wrote them this letter. He calls them “people of the flesh.” Many of the Corinthians prided themselves on their spirituality, particularly those who were gifted with what they considered ‘the higher gifts of the Spirit.’ Some claimed a more excellent pedigree on the basis of the person who baptized them, Peter or Paul. Some claimed superiority on the basis of the teacher who instructed them, such as Apollos. Apollos was a Jewish convert from Alexandria in Egypt. He was a powerful speaker, trained in the persuasive speech of the ancient world.

The Corinthians revealed their spiritual immaturity, by lording their status over others and separating into groups, on the basis of human teachers and spiritual gifts. Do we see ourselves as spiritual people, mature in Christ? Do others see us as we see ourselves, or would they say we also are fleshly Christians, infants in the faith? Paul’s words speak to us today, because while many things in the world have changed, human nature is the same. We can exhibit the same traits and express the same sinful attitudes, consciously or unconsciously in our interactions with others.

Paul wrote this letter to teach that Christian spirituality begins in the cross of Jesus, where He who had no sin took our sin upon Himself and offered Himself for our redemption. Christian spirituality was expressed by Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve and to offer Himself as a ransom for many. Christian maturity is to see our sins, see our Saviour and in Christlike compassion, treat others with dignity and serve them as Christ serves us. We are God’s field, in whom He has planted the seed of faith. We are God’s building, in whom the same Spirit dwells. It is God who works in us through the ministry of the word and throughout the world through believers who share the word. We gather in the humility of faith at the foot of the cross. God gives the growth! All glory to His Holy Name.

It was ironic that the Corinthians displayed such spiritual pride. Few if any of them, came from the intellectual elite of Corinthian Society and the Greek-Roman World. Rather than the upper echelons of society, it seems most Corinthian Christians were what people of the world would call the ‘lower classes.’ Paul reminded them, “Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised...so that no human being may boast in the presence of God.” There is no place for spiritual pride in the Christian life. God is the source of our life in Christ Jesus.

The Corinthians considered themselves spiritual people, mature in Christ. Imagine their shock as they listened to this letter being read, when Paul addresses them as fleshly people, immature believers, infants in Christ. How could Paul say such things to such excellent Christians, so richly gifted by the Spirit in tongues, discernment and wisdom and healings? The fact that they identified with Apollos, Peter, Christ or Paul to the exclusion of others and displayed their spiritual gifts as badges of personal honour, showed they had not truly appreciated their sinfulness, understood the gospel and fully embraced Christ as their Saviour.

The fact that they exalted their spirituality over others and used their spiritual gifts to beat others over the head, revealed their spiritual infancy and showed there was something fleshly about their faith. In chapter four Paul asks, ‘what do you have that you did not receive from God?’ The source of Christian spirituality is the cross through which God gives all of us forgiveness. Christian maturity is to bow our knees in thankfulness at the foot of the cross. The cross shows we have nothing to boast about in the presence of God or before others. The cross shows we have nothing to lord over others. The cross shows our sin. The cross shows we all stand in need of God’s mercy in forgiveness for the sake of Christ crucified for our sins and raised for our salvation. The word of the cross is the power of God for salvation for all who believe!

Paul says, “We are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.” The church is the body of Christ and the temple of His Spirit on earth. The word of Christ is the foundation upon which the church is built. Paul had a special attachment to the Corinthian Church. He was the first to plant the seed of faith among them. But it wasn’t Paul’s church, it was Christ’s church. The foundation Paul laid when he preached to the Corinthians was the gospel of Christ, crucified for our sins and raised for our salvation. The field in which the seed of faith is planted is the human heart. Paul planted the seed through his initial preaching. Apollos watered through

subsequent teaching of the gospel of Christ crucified for our sins and raised for our justification. Paul planted and Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

Many people have planted and watered the seed of faith in our hearts, through the ministry of the gospel. We honour their memory and give thanks to God for their service in the word. Some we may have valued more than others, but all of them are valued for the sake of the word. We value above all else, the word they shared with us. God sends servants to plant and water, but He gives the growth. Ministers like Peter, Paul and Apollos are honoured for the sake of the word. God gives the growth through the word. He is the one who nourishes our faith, matures and preserves it, so it receives fulfillment at the resurrection to life everlasting. No matter how attached we feel to certain persons in the church, our primary attachment is to Christ and the glory goes to God.

The glory goes to God, and we give glory to Him by treating each other with kindness and respect. In the thirteenth chapter Paul will say, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." We give God glory by acknowledging and respecting His presence in one another and in other believers. To disrespect a fellow believer is to dishonour the Spirit of Jesus that abides in all of us. Each believer is the field of God's work. The gathering of believers is the house in which Christ dwells through His Spirit. Divisions within the gathering of believers is a sign of sin and symptom of spiritual immaturity. The Corinthians valued wisdom and spirituality, but by separating into factions and using their spirituality to disrespect others, they displayed an infantile understanding of the gospel and an immature faith. Wisdom is to see our sins, turn to Christ in repentance for forgiveness and healing. Maturity is to live together in the same spirit.

God builds the church by the word and working of the Holy Spirit through believers like Peter, Paul and Apollos, but His word is the power that gives growth. To God goes the glory. His word is never without effect in the hearts of those who submit to its power. The primary effect of the word is faith in the human heart and incorporation into the body of Christ. The fruit of the word is unity in the household of God. God wants us to be united in Christ. God wants us to express our unity in Christ by being aware of our weaknesses, so that we respect the weaknesses of others. God wants us to express our unity in Christ by speaking His truth in love, treating each other with kindness, forgiving as He forgives us, richly and freely from the heart.

Paul doesn't want us to identify with any human teacher no matter how eloquent or exalted. He doesn't even want us to identify with himself. He wants us to identify with Christ. Was Paul crucified for us? Did Peter die for us? Paul, Apollos and Peter are honoured in the Church for the sake of the gospel they were privileged to share; the good news of Christ crucified for our sins and raised for our salvation. Paul planted. Apollos watered. God gives the growth through faith in Christ. To God be the glory. Someone planted the seed of faith in our hearts, many people have watered, but God gives the growth. We are His field and building. To Him be glory, praise and honour. In Jesus' Name. Amen