

Introduction:

- A. I'm in a pastors' prayer group and things have gotten a little competitive lately. Who knows how these things start, but we've got this little contest going: **Greatest Pastor.** Steve seems to think he's the man because he is a pastor *and* a lawyer—like that counts for anything, but the other Steve is a published author and he has some real heavy hitters in his congregation. Dwight is the oldest and he figures that just lasting longer in this job than anyone else ought to get him the honor. Chris makes movies on the side and he always wears a baseball cap so he's cooler than the rest of us, says him. Matt is a *campus pastor (!)* of a really big church. He probably twitters and blogs, too. Mark keeps reminding us that he was a Navy chaplain for umpteen years so he's got the patriotic thing going. Me... oh you know me, just a humble guy with extraordinary gifts. Plus, of course, I have the finest congregation which must prove something. You can vote at www.greatestpastorever.com. Do it soon!
- B. That's pretty much what they were doing in Corinth in 50 AD when Paul wrote to their church. The Christians there had been choosing up sides and to his horror, Paul was one of the people some were lining up behind. They thought they were showing who was most spiritual but actually they were showing who was most infantile.
- C. Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians. At the end of 1 Cor 2 Paul made the case that anything any Christian knows about God in Christ is God's gift to us. God uses apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers, to be sure, but ultimately, it is only the Spirit of God who teaches us anything significant as believers, and he teaches us *everything* we need to know, straight from the heart of God. Ch. 2 ended with this astonishing statement to every Christian: *"We have the mind of Christ."*

- D. Even though our church is not quarreling like that church, this passage, **1 Cor 3:1-9**, teaches us two basic principles of Christian maturity that squabbling believers always miss.

Remember now, Paul has just told them they have the Holy Spirit, and thus, the mind of Christ, but now he slaps them upside the head with his take on his 18 months with them: **vv.1-4...**

I. THERE IS NO EXCUSE WHEN CHRISTIANS WITH THE MIND OF CHRIST ACT LIKE BABIES! (3:1-4)

I'm sure you see the irony dripping from Paul's words. Here they are elbowing one another to get to the front of the "most spiritual" line and Paul clobbers them. He says they are "*worldly—mere infants in Christ.*" Ouch! He says in all his time all they ever got from him was milk because they could never digest anything stronger. Ouch! He says they're "*acting like mere men,*" that is, people who have learned nothing at all from the Holy Spirit. Ouch! Their teachers had surely wanted to see them move on to the solid food but they "*were not yet ready for it.*" Ouch! *You're acting like babies!* Ouch!

- A. What does he mean here by 'milk'? Christian baby food is the basic message of the gospel. Paul says in **15:3** that he taught them "*that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, the Twelve,*" and many others. That is the basic gospel message which people believe and are saved. Even after someone is converted, these are the kinds of basics we go over again and again.
- B. When someone is born again and then nourished on the nutrient-rich milk of the gospel is that the new believer changes. He or she starts to put on spiritual weight, gains muscle, learns to see the world through new eyes. Among those early baby changes are these: We become more **humble** because we see now how helpless and foolish we were and still would be except for Christ.

We become more **teachable**, eager to read and learn the Bible. Illus.: I sat next to a couple at a coffee shop recently. He had this big Bible open and was pointing out verses to her. Next to them on the table was a *Strong's Concordance*. I decided I had to meet them. He said he'd been away from Christ for many years, and now he had come home to the Lord. He and his wife just couldn't get enough of Scripture. When I explained something to them about what they were studying, he was so glad, "*Oh thank you, pastor.*" He was teachable.

Thirdly, we become more **loving**, especially toward fellow believers. We love to be in church. We want to sing, pray, eat and think with other Christians. We're like an orphan finding the big, loving family she never knew she had.

Also, we gradually become more **holy**. Our behavior shapes up. Worshipfulness, integrity, wisdom, grace—we start to take on the characteristics of Christ.

New believers, nourished by the milk of the gospel, become humble, teachable, loving, and holy.

- C. But Paul looks at this church and he sees "*jealousy and quarreling.*" He sees people *boasting* and the rich lording it over the poor. And, in effect, he says, "*You think you're so grown up as Christians?! The reality is that I've got to stick a bottle in your mouths again!*" By this time you should be eating spiritual meat, but you couldn't digest it. You don't have the heart for solid spiritual food.

There is a fascinating parallel passage to this in **Heb. 5:7-14...** The writer was explaining some pretty deep stuff about how Jesus is like the mysterious figure in the Old Testament, Melchizedek. Meaty. Then he cuts it off, saying that they can't take anything more serious. Now, I'd love to know what he was going to say next. It seems to me that what he just wrote was pretty meaty, so what more might we have learned!?

But when he spells out what he means he says in **v.13** that they can't handle *"the teaching about righteousness,"* and in **v.14**, that solid food has to do with those *"trained to distinguish good from evil."* They couldn't digest anything more about Jesus being like Melchizedek because they couldn't handle the issues of godly thinking and behavior it would require. It's like he says, *"OK, we're going to have a unit test on Jesus and Melchizedek. Put away your books and take out a piece of paper. First question: How bold have your prayers for mercy been? #2: Are you persevering through prayer? #3: Are you learning obedience through what you are suffering?"* Those are the reasons he was teaching them the meaty stuff about Jesus and Melchizedek. **He couldn't teach them more, because their behavior hadn't caught up with their knowledge.**

Back in 1 Cor 3, Paul says the proof of their immaturity was that there was *"jealousy and quarreling among them."* **When babies cannot digest solid food, they choke and vomit. When Christians can't, they quarrel over who is more spiritual and cannot wisely distinguish good from evil.**

- D. There are a number of us here who teach or who want to teach Scripture and theology. Beware! If our faith and character isn't keeping up with our knowledge, we don't know what we're talking about. Theology without godliness will sicken you, and you will leave a mess wherever you go. **We have the mind of Christ, so let us not act like babies!**

Vv.5-9...

II. MATURE CHRISTIANS KNOW THAT THEY ARE GOD'S FIELD, AND NO ONE ELSE'S (3:5-9)

Whether we are God's field workers or God's field we must only give credit where credit is due.

- A. **V.5...** Only God assigns each of his servants to their field work. I suppose it is natural to esteem the evangelist who led us to Christ, the youth pastor who stuck with us through our rebellious years, or the pastor who shepherded us. God's servants do work hard. They do serve us. They do pay a price. Paul said he came "*in weakness, fear and trembling.*" But they are in your life because *God* put them there. God matched that person to your life.

I am one of those field workers, of course. I am a double-captive of grace. Jesus saved me, and then he pulled me out of the procession of believers and captured me again, this time as a pastor. There is no earthly reason why the Lord chose the field workers he did and set the Word burning on our tongues. All of you, our saintly siblings, are gifted by Christ to serve one another in His body as surely as they are, but we are the Wordworkers. The apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers. So far as I can tell, God did not single any of us out for this work because he liked our resumes or found us in a talent search. I suspect he chose us because, going back to creation, God finds special creative delight in making something from nothing. **So give credit where credit is due.**

- B. **Vv.6-7...** Only God grows the seed his servants plant and water. When you look back over your Christian life there are undoubtedly servants of God who helped you grow most. In fact, no one grows in their faith without God's field workers who have brought planted and watered God's Word in our lives. **But make no mistake: no servant of God ever grew you.**

Both field workers and field need to remember that. Illus.: I've probably mentioned this before, but when we came here in February 1998 the church was about 150 people. I assumed that if I did what I was supposed to do—

if I preached the Word and took care of the flock—by that fall we would be in two services. Our last church had grown. I brought the same gifts to this one, so I figured I could bank on growth here, too. Well, there has been growth, beautiful growth, but numbers aren't the measure. I'm learning an important lesson. I can't grow a church in any way. I grew up in farm country so I should have known this, but **the measure of a field is not how big it is but how high the yield. And, ultimately, the yield is entirely up to God.** So if you have grown as a Christian it is only because of God. **Give credit where credit is due.**

- C. **V.8a...** Only God's "one purpose" motivates those who serve him. At VCL, we sum up that purpose this way: **Our goal is to be and to make disciples of Jesus Christ.** If a church doesn't share that purpose with the Lord, it doesn't matter how big they are, how cool their programs are, or how popular their pastor. If that is not what the field workers are up to, they are not in league with the Lord, and the field will bring no harvest.
- D. **V.8b...** Only God's reward matters. The people bragging about which servant they followed weren't doing those servants any favors. There is no honor being named in such factions. But God *will* be sure his faithful servants are rewarded. The person who planted won't be better rewarded than the one who watered. The field worker with a huge field won't get more of God's attention than the one whose field was small or barren. **God looks at the labor.** Not just the hours, either, but also the faith invested. **Rom 12:3** tells us all to *"think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."* That is how God evaluates his servants. Did you work hard, and did you consistently trust God to work through you.

I love the encouragement Peter gives to his fellow-shepherds, the elders of churches. In **1 Pet 5** he tells us to

“be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care.”

We’re to oversee willingly, sacrificially, with servant hearts, and as consistent examples. Then he says in **v.4**, *“And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”* It’s nice to be appreciated by God’s people, but the one reward that matters, and the one that his faithful servants can count on, is God’s. **So give credit where credit is due.**

Mature Christians know they are God’s field and no one else’s.

Conclusion

In his book *What Good Is God?*, Philip Yancey writes:

This is a true story from Afghanistan that took place in the early 1970s, before the Russian occupation or the Taliban regime. At the time, the government allowed a small Christian church to service internationals who worked there, though no Afghans could attend.

A friend of mine named Len organized a musical team of young people to tour countries in the Middle East. With some trepidation, he also accepted an invitation to extend the trip to Afghanistan for a concert in downtown Kabul. Len made the teenagers write out exactly what they would say, subject to his approval. ***“This is a strict Muslim government,” he warned them. “If you say the wrong thing, you could end up in prison and at the same time jeopardize every Christian who lives in this country. Memorize these words and don’t dare stray from them when you perform.”*** The teenagers listened wide-eyed as he described the ominous consequence of a slight misstep

The night of the official concert in Kabul, almost a thousand Afghans filled the hall and spilled outside the open doors to listen. All went well until one teenager on the team put down his guitar and started improvising: ***“I’d like to tell you about my best friend, a man named Jesus, and the difference he has made in my life.”*** From the side of the stage, Len motioned wildly for him to stop, drawing his finger across his neck. Ignoring him, the teenager proceeded to give a detailed account of how God had transformed his life.

“I was practically beside myself,” Len told me. “I knew the consequences, and I sat with my head in my hands waiting for the sword to drop. Instead, the most amazing thing happened. The Minister of Cultural Affairs for Afghanistan stood and walked to the stage to respond.

“We have seen many American young people come through this country,” he said. “Most of them come for drugs, and most look like hippies. We have not seen nor heard from young people like you. God’s love is a message my country

needs. How thrilled I am to hear you! You are a prototype for the youth of Afghanistan to follow in the future. I would like to invite you to expand your tour so that you visit every college and faculty and also give this same message on Kabul Radio. I will make it happen."

Len was dumbfounded. That night he gathered the musical group together. "Did you hear what the man said? We're changing our tickets, of course, to lengthen our visit. And he wants you to give this same message— you'd better not change a word!"

Over the next few days, the musical team held other performances. After each event Afghan young people crowded around with questions. Tell me more about this Jesus—we know of him through the Qur'an. You speak of a personal relationship with God. Can you describe it? How does your faith change you? Some asked to pray with the teenagers. Nothing like it had ever happened in Afghanistan.

On the last day, after a triumphant tour, the teenagers met J. Christy Wilson, a revered figure in Afghanistan. Born of missionary parents in Iran, he ... [had] spent 22 years in Afghanistan, serving as principal of a government high school and teaching English to the Crown Prince and Afghan diplomats. He also led the Community Christian Church and founded the School for the Blind in Kabul.

Wilson drove the teenagers to an unusual tourist site, the only cemetery in Afghanistan where "infidels" could be buried. He walked to the first, ancient gravestone, pitted with age. "This man worked here 30 years and translated the Bible into the Afghan language," he said. "Not a single convert. And in this grave next to him lies the man who replaced him, along with his children who died here. He toiled for 25 years, and baptized the first Afghan Christian." As they strolled among the gravestones, he recounted the stories of early missionaries and their fates.

At the end of the row he stopped, turned, and looked the teenagers straight in the eye. "For 30 years, one man moved rocks. That's all he did, move rocks. Then came his replacement, who did nothing but dig furrows. There came another who planted seeds, and another who watered. And now you kids—you kids—are bringing in the harvest."

"It was one of the great moments of my life," Len recalls. "I watched their faces as it suddenly dawned on these exuberant American teenagers that the amazing spiritual awakening they had witnessed was but the last step in a long line of faithful service stretching back over many decades." [PT.com; "A Youth Group Witnesses..."]

"God made it grow... We are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field." So give credit where credit is due.