

A colleague of mine in a pastors’ group once reminded our group of a timeless truth that we easily forget: “Any problem that has to be dealt with by people who are spiritually immature can divide a church, no matter how small it may seem.” Later on I realized how true that statement was. God has blessed me with 37 years of pastoral ministry. In that time I’ve seen divisions created by who was going to direct the children’s choir, who would chair a certain committee, or over something as trivial as moving a Sunday school class from one room to another. But I’ve also seen churches face radical changes in their community, adjust to new leadership, and become stronger through hardships.

At a conference I once attended the leader gave each participant several pipe cleaners and instructed them to spend a few minutes thinking about where they were spiritually in their lives and then to shape the pipe cleaners into something that symbolized their condition. When the time for the activity was over, each person was given a chance to tell a small group what he or she had made and how it symbolized his or her own spiritual condition. I can’t remember what I made, but I do remember a middle-aged man who made a cradle. He explained with a touch of regret in his voice: “I’m a Christian who has never grown up, so I thought this cradle best tells my story.” This was the story of most of the Christians at Corinth, and it created a tremendous obstacle to Paul’s leadership. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with being an infant or a child.

One of the greatest joys of ministry for me has been doing *Time with the Children* in all the worship services that I lead. It only lasts a few minutes but of course it must be presented on a child’s level. It’s only natural for children to have the understanding of a child. But after they grow up and try to live as followers of Christ, and still have only a child’s capacity for understanding, they’re not really living as God wants them to live. This was Paul’s problem in Corinth and, to some degree, it’s a problem in many 21st century churches. The analogy in which Paul contrasts different types of spiritual food was also popular with other Biblical writers. In 1 Peter, new Christians are instructed, “*Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good*” (1 Peter 2:2-3). These words from Peter assume the naturalness of spiritual milk for spiritual babies as a way to stimulate growth.

But the author of Hebrews is dealing with a Corinthian-like situation when he writes: “*In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!*” (Heb. 5:12). Like Paul, he concludes a little later, “*But solid food is for the mature*” (Heb. 5:14). Throughout the New Testament “milk” is used to mean that first message of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is the preaching of the evangelist or the missionary that calls for a response of faith. It is the first important gospel word.

In the same way “meat” is understood to symbolize the teaching that moves beyond our conversion and expands the implications of the gospel to every area of life. Billy Graham once said, “I envy the work of a pastor. I’m called to preach the gospel and to ask for that first decision for Christ. But the pastor has the privilege of relating all the teachings of Scripture to that convert as they grow.” Dr. Graham was making the same distinction the Biblical writers made.

Because I don't have a computer record of every single event in ministry, I have no idea how many Confirmation students I've taught over the years that have continued in the faith. Some have since walked away from Christ and the church. So if I had to guess, I'd say it's probably more than I want to know. On the other hand, if Paul was a leader in the church today, there would probably be many people who feel that his ABC's of the faith are still too deep for them. While each Christian must accept some responsibility for how she or he responds to growth opportunities, there are certain factors that contribute to the large number of immature Christians.

An anemic understanding of the biblical teaching of discipleship, for instance, may present Christian growth as an option and not as a requirement. When we don't grow, several things happen, all of which are bad. First, we lose sight of the real goal that Jesus has for us, and that is to grow as his disciples. Second, we appear no different from people who are not Christians. Not knowing Christ and spiritual infancy can actually look quite similar. Finally, both the individual and the church suffer. Prolonged immaturity creates self-doubt, an unhealthy dependence on church leaders, and a bridge for sin into the life of that person. It is only as we grow that we are able to deal with grown-up problems, minister to the needs of others, and overcome our doubts and fears.

The Corinthian problem continues to plague the church today. In every community there are Christians who have a greater loyalty to one of God's servants than to that person's Lord. Personality cults have been part of politics, business, education, and medicine for years. In each of those fields there are strong personalities who gather around themselves disciples to their way of thinking. But this fact of life has had a divisive effect on the church. It results in pastors and churches and denominations competing with each other. The divided church is created when we forget that we are all servants of one Lord, and that both the field and the harvest are his.

Paul describes this accurately when he says that different servants at different times do different tasks (i.e. planting and watering), but it is "*only God who makes things grow*" (v. 7). The source of real unity among Christians is that we are all servants of the same Master; and the source of unity in the church is that we are all recipients of God's grace. Our greatest loyalty ought to be to our gracious God and not to one of his servants, no matter how important a role that person may have played in our personal story of faith.

The craziness of the times we are living in begs for the kind of common sense instruction that Paul gives the Corinthians. He sends them a pastoral letter that finally says, "Stop acting like children!" How many pastors have wanted to say that to a quarreling church? How many voters have wanted to say that to people running for office or people that have already been elected to office?

Paul remembers that when he first arrived at Corinth there was so much that he wanted to say, but couldn't say because they were infants in Christ. He met them where they were, feeding them milk, teaching the "ABC's" of the faith, knowing that they would progress to more substantial matters. Even now, he argues, they are still not ready, because they are still acting like children fighting on the playground.

Paul goes back to the dividing issue of to whom they are giving their allegiance. It would be fair to say he basically says, “We don’t have time for that.” There are those who argue that Paul is all about grace; grace and not works. And certainly his theological center is on salvation by grace through faith. But there is work to be done. What seems clear to me is that our work does not earn our place, but we work because God has given us a place; because of what Jesus Christ has done *for* us and *in* us. The life we are called to live is an active life. We are **coworkers** in God’s field. We are laborers on God’s building. Maybe we’ve tried doing it by ourselves. Maybe we need to let *God make things grow*. Do what we can, where we can, as we can, but trust that God will take what we have and what we do, and make it grow.

Notice too that Paul makes an image shift at the end of our passage. He’s already talked about infants, milk and solid food; and then planting, watering and growing. In the last verse he throws in *a building*. It seems odd, unless you read on in verse 10. Verse nine is a metaphor hinge, or a pivot. He swings from one image to another. But there is at least one common element in all of the images. Paul seemed to emphasize that they are all labor intensive; they all require some effort on our part. The Corinthians had to grow or build. The starting place was not the ending place; the origination was not the destination. Paul stressed that there was more to come. He wanted the church to grow. He wants us to grow. That’s why he wrote the letter.

During the Great Depression a seminary student in Kansas City had very little money. He had received an invitation to preach in a rural Missouri church with the chance that the church might hire him permanently. He struggled to get together the train fare to the little town where the church was located. Just before he left, he discovered that a fellow student had been without food for several days. After struggling with his conscience, he kept enough money for a one-way ticket and gave the friend the rest of his money for food. He whispered a prayer and boarded the train.

His worst fears were confirmed as the train inched its way through a Midwestern blizzard. Mile after mile, he saw the snow rising higher and higher, beginning to cover the fence posts. He felt betrayed by God, and prayed that the blizzard might stop but it just kept on. That night, he stayed with a family that lived near the church. The next morning, they made their way through the deep snow to the little white-frame church, and he even wondered if there would be enough people present to have services. He tried to decide how to explain his predicament to the family that had housed him.

But when they arrived at the church, he was surprised to find the little building warm from the fire in the pot-bellied stove and full of men, women and children. He discovered that blizzards were nothing new to Missouri farmers. Whole families had walked three or four miles to come to church. They had a fine service, and the offering was plenty to take care of his needs. The seminary student said, “I learned a lesson. When God calls us to serve him, he doesn’t abandon us. He works side by side with us.”

And so he does. “*For we are **coworkers** in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building*” (v. 9).

And so we are. Amen.