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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS

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**THE DANGER OF NOT PRESSING TOWARD MATURITY
 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-4**

INTRODUCTION

In 1 Corinthians, Paul has clearly distinguished between 2 kinds of persons; the man with the Spirit (2:12) and the man without the Spirit (2:14). Now Paul teaches us that within Christianity there are mature and immature believers. To be clear, I do not think Paul means to imply that some Christians will never mature in the faith. But I do think he teaches us that every believer is immature at some point in his spiritual pilgrimage. I also think Paul warns immature Christians not to be comfortable being immature, rather they must press on toward maturity. Genuine Christianity is marked by a gradual increase in becoming like Christ and a person who has no interest in becoming like Christ is not a genuine believer. But the Corinthians were believers, yet they were struggling to embrace genuine spirituality as God revealed it to them through His Apostles. In 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Paul identifies three markers of progress toward genuine spiritual maturity.

1. GENUINE SPIRITUALITY IS MARKED BY PROGRESSING FROM BEING CONTROLLED BY THE FLESH TO BEING CONTROLLED BY THE SPIRIT OF JESUS (3:1)

The Corinthians' primary problem here is that they were genuine Christians thinking, talking and behaving like their non-Christian neighbors. In verse 1, Paul calls them his brothers in the Lord and then he honestly acknowledges that when he first taught them, he had to address them as if they were spiritual babies. The Corinthians possessed the Spirit, but they were not appropriating the Spirit; they were not under the control of the Spirit of Christ. So when Paul taught them, he did so with the wisdom that remembered they were largely controlled by the flesh or what J.I. Packer called *fallen instincts*.

Spiritual maturity begins with a work of God's Spirit called regeneration, or being born again. Sinclair Ferguson writes, *we have a tendency to think of being 'born again' as an inexplicable, private, mystical 'experience'. For the New Testament, however, being born again meant entering into fellowship and brotherhood with Jesus Christ.* This new birth not only changes our relationship to Jesus, but it changes our relationship to sin as well. We now have new desires and abilities to relate to sin. Sin is no longer our master, but it does remain a constant influence in our lives. Therefore, when one is newly regenerated, we should expect some immaturity. Verse 1 is not a rebuke. The Corinthians were new believers, infants in Christ and Paul addressed them as such.

Once we have been born again, God commands us to submit to His Spirit, the same Spirit which controlled Jesus. We have come into fellowship with Jesus and now progress must be made so that we embrace the lordship of Jesus over all of life. So the issue for the Corinthians is not their justification, but their sanctification. Two additional thoughts will help us to understand what is being communicated here: (1) Christian maturity is the gradual process of embracing the lordship

of Jesus over every part of our lives and this is nothing short of a war with our flesh (2) Jesus wins this war with our flesh through the application of the Word and sacraments. Michael Horton has written, *situated between the first and second Advent, we must be content with the Messiah's gift, the Comforter who himself is no less divine than the Son himself. This Holy Spirit leads us to Christ and brings Christ to us through Word and sacrament. As God concealed his glory in the physical humanity of his flesh, so he comes clothed to us in the physical elements of ink and paper; in the human language of preaching; in water, bread, and wine. And there we meet with God and feed on him whose flesh is true food and whose blood is true drink, nourishing our world-weary souls with the very substance of Heaven itself.* This is how Jesus will extend His lordship throughout the earth and this is how He will extend it throughout our lives. Paul now speaks of this Word which he taught.

2. GENUINE SPIRITUALITY IS MARKED BY PROGRESSING FROM A SIMPLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS' CROSS TO A MORE COMPREHENSIVE & HUMBLE UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS' CROSS (3:2)

When Paul first preached to the Corinthians, *he proclaimed the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:1-2).* This was the milk which he offered the newborn babies. Newborns are supposed to crave the milk which is God's Word (1 Peter 2:2). Paul taught them as if they were little children, carefully explaining the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross because they were not capable of receiving more. Again, thus far we do not have any kind of rebuke. But now Paul must correct them because after years of believing, they were not able to receive the solid food which Paul desired to feed them.

The solid food reflects a more comprehensive understanding of the cross which brings about humility. There is no doubt that the Corinthians understood that they had been reconciled to God through the cross, but their identity had not been shaped by that fact. Their identity was currently being shaped by their particular choice of leaders with whom they aligned themselves. They rejected the pure milk which Paul offered to seek after "solid food" which was really no food at all. Paul wants the Corinthians to grow deeper in their understanding of the cross and its effects on their lives.

3. GENUINE SPIRITUALITY IS MARKED BY PROGRESSING FROM A PRIDEFUL ATTITUDE THAT DESTROYS RELATIONSHIPS TO JESUS' HUMBLE ATTITUDE THAT SUSTAINS RELATIONSHIPS (3:3-4)

The clear evidence Paul offers to prove that the cross had not permeated their lives was the jealousy and strife which characterized their relationships. Paul reminds them that jealousy and strife characterize unbelievers' relationships and therefore, jealousy and strife should not characterize their relationships. Like the Corinthians, if we want to know if the message of Jesus' cross has permeated our lives, we must examine our relationships. How does the message of the cross work to sustain relationships?

First of all, the message of the cross commands us to humble ourselves and give our lives away serving others. Secondly, the message of the cross prevents us from boasting about what makes us superior to one another. Thirdly, the cross teaches us to have a forgiving attitude toward one another. Finally, the cross provides us with an example of how we may gain true life by dying to ourselves in obedience to God. But without a thorough understanding of the cross, we continue in our pride and we destroy the very relationships that God entrusts to us. As Matthew Henry said, *It is but too common for persons of very moderate knowledge and understanding to have a great measure of self-conceit.* Whatever we may think of our spiritual maturity, if it is not reflected by our

day to day interactions with others, then we are immature. In fact, when we cannot sustain relationships through humility, service and forgiveness, we act as men without the Spirit (v4).

CONCLUSION

Paul pleads for distinctly Christian lives from the Corinthians. He wants their understanding of the cross to permeate their congregation. He recognizes that they are true believers while presently they are living as if they had no understanding of the cross at all. Once again, he offers them the pure milk of the Gospel because he knows it will become solid food to promote health and growth in them. These are spiritual people and they must begin to walk in the Spirit of Christ.