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The Spiritually Immature Cause Division with Competitive Attitudes

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

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Rivalry in Ministry Is Due to Thinking that Our Ministry Belongs to Us

Verse 1—At this time, Paul *could not speak to you as to spiritual men*, not because they were unbelievers but because they were *as to men of the flesh* (σαρκίνους “flesh or carnal”) due to competitive rivalry in the church. Since they had become believers, they had not been growing in a way that leads to spiritual maturity. So addressing them within that realm as *spiritual men* was useless.

- Paul then qualified their fleshly state *as infants* (νηπίους “immature”) *in Christ*. They were living in the realm of childishness by adopting secular wisdom and then adapting it to their Christian relationships.

Application—Salvation gets one into heaven, but spiritual growth should lead to spiritual maturity.

Spiritual maturity is that process of full comprehensive development into the image of Jesus Christ, which is reached through continual growth. This is the purpose of all ministry (Colossians 1:28-29).

Verses 2-3—Lacking maturity, they could not receive more advanced teaching that would contribute to their spiritual growth. *I gave you milk to drink* (basic and elementary Christian teaching), *not solid food*. And the reason is, *you were not able to receive solid food*.

- *In fact, you are still not ready for solid food*—more advanced teaching that would develop spiritual maturity. The reason is, *you are still influenced by the flesh*. Not only were they spiritually immature, they were carnal.
- The evidence for their carnality was *jealousy* (ζήλος “envious and contentious rivalry”) *and dissension* (ἔρις “strife and wrangling”) *among you*, both of which contributed to their competitive partisanship. This inability to get along showed their flesh dominated them. So, Paul says *are you not fleshly? Are you not walking like mere men?* This accusation is what humanity does without the Spirit’s influence.
- The world divides into factions to compete for prominence, influence, and power. Competitive attitudes between believers is thinking and acting fleshly. But the point of the spiritual life is to move beyond that.

Application—The need to ‘grow up’ is the aim of the entire New Testament. A new believer may explain salvation as ‘Christ died for my sins.’ A growing believer would go into things like justification, substitution, and propitiation. The first is *milk*. The second *solid food*.

Verse 4—An example of their carnality was the partisanship amongst them, *for whenever someone says ‘I am of Paul,’ and another ‘I am of Apollos.’* They were dividing themselves up according to ‘Paul’ an apostle-faction or an ‘Apollos’ Paul’s co-worker faction. Divided loyalties around individuals is indicative of the spiritual immaturity of fleshly-dominated believers.

The Remedy for Division Is Understanding It Is God’s Ministry, Not Ours

Verses 5-7—*What then is Apollos or Paul anyway only servants through whom you came to believe*, not the source of that salvation. Even the opportunities to bring the gospel or discipleship are God’s doing *even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one*.

- God gave Paul the opportunity to plant the Corinthian church *I planted* (ἐφύτευσα “to instill or implant”), and *Apollos watered* (ἐπότισεν “to water or irrigate”). They were the means, but not the cause of the Corinthians salvation. *God caused it to grow* and deserved the credit for any outcomes.
- So there should be no factions *neither the one who plants counts for anything nor the one who waters*. **For our part, we all get to participate with God in what He is doing in the world.** Some inaugurate ministry and others nurture ministry, *but God...causes the growth*. Note the repetition—the point is, we labor for the kingdom, but God determines the fruit of that labor.

Verse 8—So *the one who plants* (inaugurates), *and the one who waters* (nurtures) *work as one*. The work is of unified action with a single purpose to facilitate growth. Factions are counterproductive to the process of spiritual growth. God recognizes the individuality of our contribution to the spiritual development of believers, *but each will receive his reward according to his work*. We will receive individual rewards for our individuality of ministry to the body of Christ.

Verse 9—***We are coworkers belonging to God, not competitive agents building our own kingdoms.*** We are all insignificant compared to the God we are serving and His work we are doing. *You are God’s field, God’s building*. God works amongst us and through us to build up His household. **Carnality sees it as our ministry, our kingdom, or our domain.**

Application—The point is, God does not need any of us to accomplish His ends, BUT He is willing to use us. We can labor with God by participating in what it is He is doing in the world.