

Day 85, 1 Corinthians 3

by David Servant

Paul addresses the issue of carnal Christians and the importance of not dividing over favorite leaders, but rather recognizing that every God-sent leader belongs to all believers.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 5:11

Topics: "Christian Unity", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

David Servant preaches on the misconception of the 'carnal Christian' doctrine derived from 1 Corinthians, emphasizing the importance of understanding the context of Paul's words to the Corinthians. Despite facing challenges, the Corinthian Christians demonstrated their faith through their actions, such as abstaining from immoral behaviors, partaking in the Lord's Supper, and showing love for fellow believers. Paul's message to the Corinthians highlights the need for unity, humility, and focusing on what truly matters in the body of Christ.

Transcript

It is from this chapter that the modern doctrine of the "carnal Christian" has been extracted, which promotes the idea that one can be a true Christian but be "carnal" (or "fleshly" as the NASB translates it), and thus be completely indistinguishable from unbelievers. This idea is taken largely from Paul's words in 3:3, where he asks, "Are you not walking [living] like mere men?"

As with most all false doctrine, this one has its basis in ignoring context. A quick survey of everything Paul wrote to the Corinthians reveals that they were not indistinguishable from the world. Describing some of them, Paul wrote that they had previously been fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, covetous, drunkards and swindlers, but were no longer (6:9-10). Paul also instructed the Corinthian Christians "not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one" (5:11). Obviously, the Corinthian believers were not guilty of these things themselves, otherwise Paul would have been telling them not to associate with themselves.

This first Corinthian letter was, in part, Paul's response to a letter he had received from them concerning several issues. They had asked him questions regarding what was right and wrong, indicating their own desire to do what was right.

The Corinthian Christians regularly partook of the Lord's Supper and gathered together for Christian worship (1 Cor. 12, 14), something not done by unbelievers in their day. They were also zealous of spiritual gifts (14:12). They had been collecting money for poor believers in Jerusalem (16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:10, 9:1-2), displaying their love for the brethren, exactly what Jesus said would mark His true disciples (John 13:35). Paul wrote in 11:2: "Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you."

The conclusion? When Paul wrote that the Corinthian Christians were "walking like mere men," he obviously did not mean that they were completely indistinguishable from unbelievers in every respect. They were acting just like non-Christians do in one way, yielding to jealousy and strife, but in many other ways they were acting like devoted disciples of Christ.

Hoping to eliminate that strife among them over their favorite leaders, Paul painted those leaders as they really were---servants who were nothing in comparison to God. Paul had laid a spiritual foundation in Corinth that Apollos, a teacher, built upon. They were one, working for the same cause (3:8). Yet, each would receive his own reward "according to his own labor" (3:8). Paul then figuratively represented their labor with six different types of building materials, gold, silver and precious stones---which are costly and inflammable---and wood, hay and straw, which are relatively inexpensive and burn easily. One day the works of God's servants will be put through a fire to test their quality.

Obviously, those who built with wood, hay and straw will see their works consumed in the fire, and they will go unrewarded, yet still be saved (3:15). Ministers who are not wolves in sheep's clothing, yet who still compromise truth, water down or alter the gospel, or who mislead goats into thinking that they are sheep, will be blessed to suffer nothing more than to watch their works burn in the fire and lose their subsequent rewards. False teachers, on the other hand, will find themselves, not just their works, in God's fire.

Paul issues a solemn warning to those who engender strife. They actually destroy God's temple, the church, and God will destroy them (3:16-17). Wow. Paul then concludes with an admonition not to divide over their favorite leaders, but to recognize that every God-sent leader belongs to them all. Those leaders are just one small expression of God's great love for them, and are representative of His greatest blessing, namely, Christ Himself.

In a sense, the believers in Corinth were like little children of a rich king arguing over small coins. The small issues that divide us vanish when we focus on what is truly important.

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