

INTRO

In his book *Glorious Mess*, pastor and author Mike Howerton tells of a time when he was growing up in California and it rained one day—and it rained hard. Mike got his buddies together to play some mud football in a gulley. The heavy rain left behind inches of mud, and in quick order, they were slipping and sliding away. Mike describes a moment when they were at the line of scrimmage, ready to hike the ball, when he noticed something on his buddy’s shoulder across from him. He looked more closely, and, in an instant, he recognized it. Without hesitation, Mike yelled, “That’s toilet paper! We’re playing in poop water!” The game ended abruptly! Hence, the title of his book, *Glorious Mess*. The Apostle Paul could have put the same title on his letter to the church in Corinth, calling the letter *Glorious Mess!*

Context Before Content

Corinth was quite the city in its day. As a center for trade and commerce, the citizens of Corinth were all about money and the things that money could buy. As an intellectual center, citizens of Corinth gathered learned people called sophists and gnostics who were highly skilled orators. People traveled to Corinth to have a good time as the city was well-known for its “adult entertainment,” if you know what I mean. Amid this rapidly growing metropolitan center, a church was planted. There was a church in Corinth, but there was a lot of Corinth in the church! That is why Paul wrote this stern letter.

It’s important for us to remember that Paul was writing to believers, not unbelievers (1 Cor 1:30 “It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus...”). Even in our text today (3:1-9), Paul began with the phrase “brethren” (*adelphoi*, “brothers and sisters”), and he used this term more than two dozen times in this letter! Paul wrote to believers, followers of Jesus. If it’s repeated... Hence, the message today is for the Church, for believers. For those who are not yet followers of Jesus, the principles we discover in the text still speak into our lives.

Here's one more important piece of context: the timeline for when this letter was written. Paul planted this church on his second of three missionary journeys (see Acts 18:1-10). Paul stayed with this new church for a year and a half (v. 11). He then left there (v. 18) and began his third missionary journey (v. 23), during which time he arrived in Ephesus (Acts 19:1), where he planted a church and stayed there for three years. While at Ephesus, it is believed, Paul wrote this letter. From the time the church in Corinth was started, roughly five years have passed until they received this letter. Please remember that important piece of context: five years have passed since the time these individuals became *adelphoi* (“brothers and sisters”).

As we now dive into the text, let’s take a moment to pray.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are

you not mere human beings? What, after all is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor.

Like cream rising in milk, three observations rise to the top and capture our attention in this part of Paul’s letter.

IMMATURITY

1 Corinthians 3:1-3a

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly.

Instead of calling them grown men and women of God, Paul called them “infants” (*nepios*). Paul spoke the truth in love. Like a father, Paul said what needed to be said. The believers in FCC Corinth got off to a good start, but it ended there—at the start. The men and women in Corinth became believers and were born again spiritually. Paul gave them spiritual milk as newborns for 1 ½ years (Acts 18:9-10). Yet, five years have passed since they were spiritually born, and they were still on the proverbial bottle. Imagine a five-year old walking around the house, running out in the yard with a baby bottle in his mouth. Something is wrong with that picture, and there’s something wrong with the picture of the church in Corinth: immaturity.

A baby is a beautiful thing. A toddler learning to walk is an incredible sight. But when an adult acts like a baby, it is heart-breaking to the parents. The same can be said spiritually. It breaks the heart of God, the Father, when believers—Christians—act like little children, refusing to grow up. Not only did this grieve Paul, but it would have grieved the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). This problem with spiritual immaturity wasn’t only a problem in Corinth. It was widespread. The writer of Hebrews described it this way.

Hebrews 5:12-6:1

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! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore, let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity....

Some things never change. Not only was spiritual immaturity a problem in the first-century church, but it remains a problem today in the twenty-first century church. Author and pastor Dr. Juan Carlos Ortiz in his book *Disciple* identifies what he believes to be the greatest problem, the greatest threat facing the Church. He calls it “the perpetual childhood of the believer.”

If we, as parents, have a five-year-old who is not growing, we will ask an obvious question: “What’s wrong?” After all, God designed the human body to grow, and if it doesn’t, something is wrong. The same is true spiritually: God designed believers to grow spiritually and when they remain spiritually immature, an obvious question must be asked: “What’s wrong?” Paul answered that very question.

1 Corinthians 3:1-3a

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Paul identified a problem *within* the Corinthian believers. They were not “living by the Spirit,” but as “worldly” (i.e., *sarkinos*, “fleshy ones,” carnal). Think of it this way. When every person is physically born, we are born with a fallen nature. We are born with the propensity and capacity to sin. As we grow, we come to a point in life when we know the difference between moral right and wrong. Every human chooses to do wrong. Paul said, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). So that sinful, fallen, carnal, worldly nature is within each believer. Jesus said that when a person becomes a Christian, that individual is born again (John 3:1-7). When that person is immersed, the individual receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). At that moment, a struggle begins in the interior world of the believer. Paul described that battle in his own life in this way.

Romans 7:18-25

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The sinful, carnal nature is in constant conflict with the spiritual, godly nature. The Corinthian Christians never grew up spiritually because their diet was wrong. They became what they ate or *didn’t* eat. Think with me. We become what we eat. If we keep ordering and eating deep-fried pork tenderloin sandwiches with a side order of fries—instead of a salad—we become what we eat. This is not rocket science. Similarly, whatever nature is fed within a Christian, it is that nature that grows. If Christians feed their sinful nature, that nature grows stronger while their spiritual nature grows weaker. They become what they eat. Spiritually, a believer who feeds the sinful, carnal nature is unable to hear the voice of God, sense His presence, understand His Word, resist temptation, discern the will of God, avoid making one poor decision after another, and more. Life is a “glorious mess.” On the other hand, if the Christian feeds the godly nature, that nature grows stronger, and it is clearly obvious. Paul described it this way:

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. Against such things, there is no law.

We have an apple tree in our backyard. How do I know it's an apple tree? It has apples on it. It is obvious what nature a Christian is feeding within their interior world—by the spiritual fruit (or lack) that results. We become what we eat. This simple, timeless truth is well described in this old poem: “There are two hearts inside my chest. One is cursed and the other is blest. One I love and one I hate. The one I feed will dominate.”

DISUNITY

Paul then provided proof that they were spiritually immature.

1 Corinthians 3:3b-4

For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings?

Some things never change. FCC Corinth got a new pastor. Paul was out and Apollos was in. Paul got on the road to start and help churches, and young Apollos became the new pastor in Corinth (see Acts 18:27-19:1). That sounds familiar. A few months ago, I happened to be here at The Creek on a Sunday and one of the younger staff members (who happens to be a very gifted musician and worship leader and whose wife is a gifted business owner whose name rhymes with ‘Holly’) introduced me to his wife and she said, “Oh, so you’re the old guy.” Some things never change, yet there was—and still remains—a risk, a danger for every congregation.

When Christians struggle with immaturity, it results in disunity.

Immaturity produces a “them and us” mindset, which was wrong then and is still wrong today. It’s not “some follow Gary and some follow Dan.” A church is never to be personality-driven, but only person-driven and that Person is only and forever Jesus Christ! Hebrews 12:2 says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” It’s all eyes on Jesus and no one else. Anything or anyone less creates conflict.

It’s not surprising the Corinthian church was full of conflict; after all, the church was full of babies. One of the first words a toddler learns is not “mommy”; it’s “mine.” When believers remain spiritual babies, whether in the first century or twenty-first century church, they are self-centered, which can only lead to “jealousy and quarreling.” *Where there are people, there will be problems*. Disunity is a sure sign of immaturity.

When the members of FCC Corinth came to this portion of Paul’s letter, they could have responded with, “All right already, Paul. You’ve called us out on this, no need to bring it up again” (1:12), but he did because disunity dishonored Jesus. They were “acting like mere humans,” a phrase that Paul also repeated. Twice Paul called them out for behaving like “mere

humans.” They were not acting or behaving like Jesus. They were *Christians*, and the suffix means they were followers of Jesus. They should have been following both His teaching and His example of unity.

One of the most powerful teachings of Jesus on unity was a prayer of His. With roughly six hours before He was crucified, Jesus prayed what is the longest recorded prayer in the Bible, and in it, Jesus prayed for the believers in Corinth. Here’s what He asked for them: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me” (John 17:20-21). Jesus prayed for them to be united, and not philosophically or organizationally, but to be relationally united. He did not pray for them to have a new church building or all the money they could ever need, but that they would be one in relationship, just as He and His Father are one, so that “the world (i.e., people) may believe that You have sent Me.”

And not only did Jesus PRAY for them (and all believers) to be united, He gave them the answer for how it came become reality! Jesus prayed to His FATHER. Whenever Jesus prayed to God, He always said “Father” (i.e., “This is how you should pray, ‘Our Father in heaven...’”). Even from the cross, Jesus prayed: “Father, forgive them”; “Father, into your hands...”). Yet only once did Jesus pray, “My God! My God! Why...” Jesus was fully and completely God, yet He did not consider equality with God something to grasped (Philippians 2: 5-7). Jesus submitted Himself to God—and the Corinthians should have done the same to one another as *Christians*. They did not act like Jesus, but like “mere humans.”

Such is human nature. Conflict did not begin in Corinth. People fussing and fighting with one another can be found from the opening pages of Scripture: Cain killed his brother Abel; Joseph was human trafficked by his brothers when they decided not to kill him. Aaron and Miriam rebelled against their baby brother, Moses, and God took them to task for disrespecting the leader of His people. Talk about disunity in those *supposedly* godly families. King Saul tried to murder David, his successor. The twelve disciples argued constantly as to who would be the greatest. When believers struggle with spiritual *immaturity*, *disunity* will be more than real among them. For they are acting like “mere humans” and not like Jesus. When believers decide to intentionally, deliberately submit to one another, only then will they become one.

HUMILITY

1 Corinthians 3:5-9

What, after all is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor.

Paul did not make a grammatical mistake in verse 5, asking “what?” instead of asking, “Who is Apollos? Who is Paul?” Paul objectified both himself and Apollos, calling them “only servants.” Paul did not give himself or Apollos a positional title of authority. The word “servant” is

diakonos, which means just that—servant. It was a word that referred to table servants bringing food to a table. At the heart of this paragraph is humility.

Spiritual immaturity results in disunity, which can only be eliminated through humility. Submission to one another requires *humility*.

Paul could have been anything but humble. He was highly credentialed. Academically, he was taught by Gamaliel, a highly respected Jewish leader. As to skill, Paul was a trained craftsman, a tentmaker by trade. Moreover, in his day, he was one of the most traveled individuals we read of in the Word.

Paul was the first to arrive on the scene in Corinth, and he “planted seed,” telling people about Jesus. He left on his third missionary journey, and Apollos was the second to arrive on the scene in Corinth, and he “watered the seed” that Paul had planted, and then “God made it grow.” God gave the increase, bringing salvation through Jesus. Attention and acclaim was not given to Paul or Apollos, but only to God. Paul and Apollos were co-workers; they were equal. One was not exalted over the other. They were both simply servants of God. *Humility* makes that happen.

Like cream rising in milk, three things rise to top of our thinking and stand out in this portion of Paul’s letter to “First Christian Church Corinth”: immaturity, disunity, humility.

Now for the obvious question: **So what?** How does this speak to life today, here and now, both to you and to me? James 1:22 states, “Do not be mere hearers of the Word and so deceive yourselves, do what it says.” As Jesus wrapped up His Sermon on the Mount, He said that those who hear His words and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house (i.e., life) on the sure foundation of His teaching, but the person who hear His words and chooses to not put them into practice is a fool. We come to this moment when we have the same choice to make. Will we hear the Word of God, the teachings of Jesus and immediately put them into practice OR will the Word go in one ear and out the other, as we have places to go, people to see and things to do?

Here’s how I suggest we deal with this reality. As a memory tool and as a question guide, let’s use the name of this church ICCC, Indian Creek Christian Church.

I → I have to deal with what the Word says. Because I claim to be a Christian, God calls me personally, individually to hear and respond to Him right now, right here. So, am I...

C → Childish?

Am I spiritually immature? Remember, about five years passed from the time Paul arrived in Corinth to the time he wrote this letter to them. Using that time frame, I ask myself, have I grown spiritually in the last five years? Donald Whitney wrote a book that has been helpful to me as he asks ten questions to diagnose my spiritual health. Think about the last five years in your life as I think about the last five years in my life. Personally, individually ask:

Do I thirst for God?
Am I governed increasingly by God's Word?
Am I more loving?
Am I more sensitive to God's presence?
Do I have a growing concern for the spiritual and temporal needs of others?
Do I delight in the Bride of Christ?
Are the spiritual disciplines increasingly important to me?
Do I still grieve over sin?
Am I a quick to forgive?
Do I yearn for heaven and to be with Jesus?

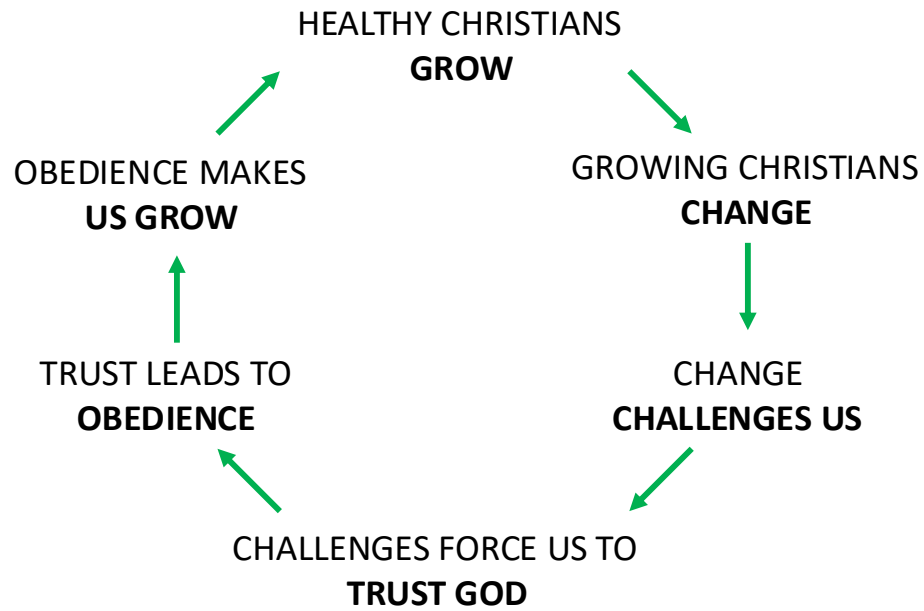
C → Critical?

Am I critical? Over the last five years, have I made more peace or conflict? Over the last five years, have I made every effort to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3) or been divisive in word and deed? In Matthew 12:34, Jesus said that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Whatever is inside my interior world of heart, mind and soul, will come out in my words, whether verbally or virtually. Whatever fills my heart, I will say out loud or on-line. If I'm critical and divisive in spirit, it will be so easy to spot by the words I speak. If I think poorly of my church (the church is people, not a place), if my sentiments of others here are less than honoring to God, I will not make peace but only problems. If I want my marriage to work with Leah, I must work at my marriage—and so must Leah! If I want my relationship to work with you, I need to work at that relationship—and so do you. If we can't do this, why would anyone "out there" want to be "in here" with us? Is there not more than enough conflict and division out there? Let's make every effort to be rid of it in here—for God's glory!

C → Crucified?

Am I crucified with Christ? In Galatians 2:20, Paul states: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." A seed must die before it can bear fruit. I must die spiritually to my wants, denying myself for the greater good of others and of God. Remember that Jesus "humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). The word humility means to "go to a lower place," and that is exactly what Jesus did. Being God, He not only became human like us, He took our sin on Himself for us. He did not demand to have His own way. Can I say the same?

Later in this letter, Paul described himself as the "least of the apostles" (1 Corinthians 5:9). About five years later when writing to Ephesus, he described himself as the "least of God's people" (Ephesians 3:8). Then, after a few more years passed, Paul described himself as "the worst of all sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). From year-to-year, Paul kept growing spiritually, becoming increasingly aware of his sin, and with increasing humility declared his only hope in Jesus. Can I say the same? What about you? Let's take Paul's command to heart: "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).



*Let everyone of us resolve today that we will not merely grow old in the faith,
we will grow up.*