

Sermon on 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9 On Christian Maturity

An interesting debate erupted on social media this week.

A fairly well known Australian Christian writer posted a photo of a sign from a church in Sydney.

The church was from a denomination other than his own.

The sign had a little quote on it which was obviously designed to provoke the attention of passers by.

The author took exception to it on theological grounds among others and expressed his displeasure publicly by posting the photo on FaceBook.

This led on to a wave of comments almost wholly from Christian people.

I'd love to tell you it was a measured and thoughtful conversation.

The derision and criticism and chest thumping and superiority and divisiveness flowed like blood from an open wound.

These are all Christian people remember.

Back forward, back forward, attack, defend, criticise, put down, often in pretty smug tones, until the author himself commented how much he was now regretting the whole thing.

So we were left with this very unseemly and unbecoming scene.

Christian infighting.

By the end a couple of people who had been on the edge of the church were making comments like, 'This is why I left.', and 'Nothing has changed.'

As far as I can tell now the whole post has been deleted by its author.

In the midst of the discussion a couple of people mentioned the telling epistle reading from 1 Corinthians 3 we have heard today.

And how Paul might feel we really haven't matured much in faith for 2000 years.

With every judgemental thought and action we only prove ourselves hypocrites.

We only pour hot coals on our own heads.

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as spiritual, but as worldly – mere infants in Christ.

Now there's a way to get people to read the annual church report.

What is astonishing is that Paul assumes they will actually listen.

It's not exactly diplomatic, but he assumes his message will sink in.

It's certainly hard to imagine any preacher nowadays beginning a sermon in this way.

It would more likely engender defensiveness and resentment than getting us to earnestly reflect on our faith.

Yet Paul has no such caution.

He sees a problem and he's out to address it. And that right soon.

The spiritual prospects and prosperity of his Corinthian church plant is on the line he believes.

So there's no time for niceties or walking on eggshells.

He tells them straight. You have not matured in your faith.

You have not grown more deeply into Christ.

You quibble and quarrel and factionalise.

You are acting in the way of the world.

Not as those grounded in the love and grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

You are mere infants who need milk, not solid food.

He reminds them that whatever ministry has been exercised among them, it has been, in the final analysis, the work of God.

So there's no point in latching onto Apollos or Paul or anyone else as if they are the real Messiah's.

They are mere workers along the way – the field of the Gospel belongs to God and is God's making.

You are God's field, God's building.

Don't get confused, don't take alternate tracks, don't bicker, don't think of yourself or your co-workers more highly than you should.

These are painfully relevant problems for Christians in the 21st C, as the engagement on social media over the church sign revealed.

We are like children, infants in fact.

And for all the commending of a childlike faith in the Bible, the intention is never that we should be childish.

We are supposed to grow ever more deeply into Christ.

To grow in Christian virtue without arrogance or superiority, but rather in the cross shaped way of Spirit inspired wisdom and humility.

To see that with all our differences we are held together through faith, and that our Christian living should reflect an ever closer drawing into God.

The new ethical potentiality of living in Christ opens out before us and we are called to follow all the way to the cross and beyond.

All that has come before this passage we've read today has pointed in the direction of Easter.

And Paul is wanting to say this is not a transactional moment, whereby we cross a line and leave it there.

We don't flick a switch when we walk into church and another when we leave.

This is a lifelong journey of prayer and worship and service that forms our character; that is put to the test with every relational interaction, every conversation, every moment of our living.

We are never fully complete, there is always more maturing to come, whatever age we may be.

This is the theory anyway, yet as we see with the Corinthians all those years ago, we too can tend to wander from the narrow path.

The character of Christian maturity is writ large across the entire New Testament.

And commentators of many stripes have pointed out that the Sermon on the Mount is like the blueprint.

You've heard it said an eye for an eye, but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. That's tough stuff.

We can probably all recite the key Christian virtues of love, compassion, grace, hope, peace, forgiveness, joy, sacrifice, humility.

We know the words, but embedding them in a life is a far longer and more involved process.

They take practise, rehearsing over and over until they become habits, a way of being.

It takes years and years and is never fully perfected.

Take grace for instance. It's hard enough to exercise grace when we're provoked for some reason or disrespected, but even harder to do so without anyone knowing or seeing.

If you're anything like me, that will be difficult.

We want our grace, when we exercise it, to be noticed, so everyone can see how gracious we are.

Of course by that stage it has ceased being grace altogether.

I think this is why Paul draws us back over and over to the cross.

The cross shatters all pretence, all self interest, even when it's self interest over a virtue as important and central as grace.

The Canadian Baptist writer and theologian DA Carson tells a story of his father, Tom, a Baptist pastor himself. ¹

At some stage in his ministry the powers that be asked Tom if he would take a role as a church planter for a church in a difficult part of the country.

Seeing himself a servant of the church, Tom agreed and pretty soon preparations were under way for the family to move.

As you can imagine it was a big effort to make this shift and a huge step into the unknown.

It was a brave move from every angle.

Well, Tom and his family moved and were settled in.

Well, having shifted and once they were preparing for the new ministry, due to infighting and bureaucratic snafus, the wider church had changed its mind and decided not to fund the project Tom had already committed to.

You can imagine the kind of upheaval and distress this whole situation would cause a young family.

And it did. Strangely, though to Tom's son, Don, it was only many years later and through other sources that he found out about the whole sorry affair.

He decided to confront his father the next time he saw him:

The conversation went like this: 'I've been hearing some interesting things from 1948-9.'

'Oh?', 'It seems you had a significant role to play?', 'What were you told?'

Don then recounts the events pretty much as he had heard them.

'I suppose that's pretty much what happened.'

'So how come you never told us kids about any of this.'

'Marg and I decided we needed to protect our souls from bitterness. So we took a vow never to say anything unkind about TT Shields (the main culprit). And we have kept our vow.'

¹ See DA Carson's *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson*, (2008), Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, pp49-60.

Incredible.

When all our instincts would be to tell the world, to live into being the victim, to become bitter and disengaged, the decision is taken never to say an unkind word.

Now that is Christian maturity.

That is grace unpromoted.

And except for his children finding out through other sources, they may never have known the heartache the episode had created. Nor the vow of grace their parents had taken.

No-one told Tom and Marg Carson to be that way.

It was an outworking of a deep faith which no doubt continued to grow as they endeavoured to show grace to those who had not shown grace to them.

They continued to serve the church till the day they died.

We each have to walk our own journey as we seek to grow into maturity and the key thing is remembering that we are incomplete and there's more growth to come.

To be open to being taught both by the example of others and through the life and witness of the people of the Spirit of God.

Indeed often through the example of others beyond the church.

The Spirit, after all, bloweth where it will.

Strangely and wonderfully it works in this reciprocal pattern where we are all teachers and we are all students, all at the same time, but that's the wonder of the church at its best.

The community of the followers of Jesus held together in him, the one true foundation.

Living, loving, learning together, walking at the pace of the weakest, seeing that no one is left behind, always hoping, always persevering, always serving.

Among others I have a photo from the service of confirmation for Pam Restell (80 year old) and Meagan Handley (18 year old) on my office wall.

They each have their family around them, and a member of the wider church supporting them.

There in tableau is everything Christian maturity is.

The family of faith helping one nearer the beginning and one nearer the end of their Christian journey to keep on growing into Christ.

Surrounding them with love.

Pam and Colin maintain their faithfulness even as it is difficult now to get to church.

And later today Meagan will lead the first of our Uniting Families Connect services for the year.

God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good.

Amen.