

WHITE MEMORIAL

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

WMPC - Men's Bible Study

First Corinthians - Winter-Spring 2017

Lesson 3

Read 1 Corinthians Chapters 3 and 4

Three Questions:

Q1: As we begin, it is good to remember the closing argument of chapter 2. It occurs at 2: 11 - 13.

“For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.”

And when we have the Spirit, we have the “mind of Christ” - 2:16.

Now read closely 3: 1 - 4. Paul calls them — the church — “infants” - so spiritually immature that they need “milk” like a nursing child. Why do you think he makes this stringent and strong point? What does he mean by “still in the flesh” (of course they are, they are human). What do you make of this metaphor? If the preacher got in the pulpit one Sunday and told you all that you were infants (in a spiritual sense), how do you think you would react? What is the larger point he is leading them (and by proxy us) toward?

Q2: The critique that Paul offers is of the conflicts in the church. By 3:5 he is running head long into the disputes of the community. In one of the most fascinating rhetorical moves of the early chapters Paul writes about being purified through fire — building and builders - verses 3: 10 - 15. Read these verses closely. In a sense they are a set up for among the most famous verses of our study — 3: 16 - 19.

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? * If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple. Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”

What does he mean, “you are God’s temple?” How have you heard this preached and taught before? Is what you heard before changed when you read 16 - 19 in light of his gorgeous writing in 3: 10 -15? Is the traditional teaching wrong, or at least not as perfect as you have heard before?

Q3: We have always been fascinated by chapter 4: 8 - 13. As you read these verses what jumps out at you the most? How does he describe being an apostle? Does his description match up well with the “prosperity gospel” that dominates so much of our current age of Christian teaching and Christian media?

Then, take a moment to read closely 4: 14 - 21. Here he explains why he called them infants. How would you answer his question at verse 21? Would you prefer a “stick or love in a spirit of gentleness”? Which one is more effective (better yet - is he asking a question of “situation ethics” — where the specifics of the situation can demand a different response relative to the situation at hand)?

Three Insights:

I1: If you have not read Acts 18 yet, it would be a great time to do so. This is a description of the 1.5 years Paul spent in Corinth and a good reminder of his deep investment in the church there. This, as much as anything, helps to understand his extreme disappointment in the divisions that have arisen within the church. You might ask yourself whether or not we see divisions in the church in such a negative light? For Paul, dividing the body is a threat to the gospel. In Chapters 12 -14 of 1st Corinthians we get his argument *par excellence* for unity in the body. We'll get there later this spring, but for now it is good to note that he is "all in" for unity. Do we, 2000 years later, as part of a church universal which is divided into multiple denominations and expressions of Christianity, see division in the same negative light that our apostle does? If we don't, then how do we take his concern with the seriousness with which he expresses it in Chapters 3 and 4?

I2: Chapter 3 begins the long consideration of conflict in the community. Take a moment and read two "sister texts" to 1st Corinthians:

Galatians 3: 23 - 29

Ephesians 2: 13 - 22

In these texts Paul emphasizes the unity of Christ. Robert A. Bryant calls his study book on 1st Corinthians, *One In Christ*. Bryant concludes his comments on Chapter 3 like this:

"To be wise, then, is to know that we do not belong to ourselves — we belong to God. The church and everyone in it is God's field, God's building, God's temple, and this is evident to those who share the mind of Christ. God is forever the Lord over all creation. God is forever the only one capable of saving our lives. Thus the always difficult submission of our minds to the authority of Jesus Christ brings a new way of seeing the world and living in it" (page 44).

I3: Chapter 4: 20 - 21 are yet another set of intriguing and suggestive verses. Talk. Power. Sticks. Gentle spirits. Here is what Tom Wright (N.T. Wright) says in his concluding remarks on 1 Corinthians Chapter 4 in his *Paul for Everyone: 1st Corinthians*:

"Paul had no intention of telling the Corinthians to take a vote about what sort of a church they wanted. It is quite possible for a majority to be deceived (and if you find that suggestion shocking, ask yourself why). But nor was he going to bully or browbeat them from a great height. His only authority — but it is the most powerful sort — was that of someone who was living and preaching the gospel of Jesus, and acting out the commission which Jesus had given him. He didn't need to say much; he left that to the 'puffed-up' people. His uniform — the life he was living, which he urged them to copy — said all that was necessary" (page 54).

Links for further study:

L1: Let's revisit the Bible project on 1st Corinthians. It is good to watch this several times during our study. For this week, focus on the beginning, up until about 2:17 - 2 minutes and 17 seconds.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiHf8kICc4>

L2: Here is a rather heady and fascinating exposition on situation ethics.

<http://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/situational-ethics.htm>

Here is another, from Wikipedia which is a little less focused, but a little more direct.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situational_ethics

L3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4csrlAspk4>

Here is ten minute video of author, bishop, and scholar N.T. Wright from Wheaton College in 2010. He is lecturing on the unity of the church. For Wright, Paul thinks that the church, or the community in Christ, the one community of Christ is central of all of Paul's writing. This is an excellent excerpt from a larger lecture. We hope you enjoy.