

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (15-11-1998 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

1 Corinthians 3:1-4

Introduction

Corinth seemed to have more problems than any other church for Paul to deal with. But so far in his letter he has been laying down basic principles about Christ, the Gospel, the Christian church, preaching and the work of the Holy Spirit. Now he begins to focus on the problems facing the church.

Paul distinguishes three classes of people. Normally the Bible speaks of two classes – the saved and the unsaved; those on the narrow way and those on the broad way; children of God and children of the devil; those who are twice born, once to die, and those once born, twice to die. But Paul speaks here of three groups – the non-Christian, and two different types of Christian, the worldly and the spiritual.

Firstly the natural man, ψυχικος, (1 Corinthians 2:14), the non-Christian, lacking the Holy Spirit, no new birth, perishing without Christ, unsaved. Secondly, the carnal and worldly Christian, σαρκικος, (1 Corinthians 3:1,3), ruled by the flesh, indwelt but not controlled by the Holy Spirit. And thirdly the spiritual Christian, πνευματικος, (1 Corinthians 3:1), controlled and ruled by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is “resident and president” in his life.

Every one of us falls into one of these three categories. If you are a Christian, you need to face up to what kind of Christian you are. God is more concerned with the worker than the work. What I am is more important than what you do. Character is more important than service. The church is looking for better methods, but God is looking for better men. It is not enough to say, “I am a Christian”. Can you say, “I am a spiritual Christian, indwelt and controlled by the Spirit”?

The carnal or worldly Christian

Such a person is really a Christian. He has been born again, and the Holy Spirit lives within him. He is saved, but something is missing. The Holy Spirit is not in control. **Mere infants in Christ** (1 Corinthians 3:1), even though he may have been converted many years ago. He has never grown up in his faith. His grasp of Christian truth is still the same as it was at the start. He still needs to be fed with milk for he cannot cope with solids. His knowledge of the Bible is restricted to only the most familiar passages, like the Lord’s Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. And he has no appetite to learn and discover more. His prayer life has never grown; he still uses the same phrases and expresses the same desires as he did when he first prayed. When he gives his testimony, it is all about what happened 15 or 20 years ago. If he were asked what the Lord meant to him this week, there would be an embarrassed silence.

Like a baby, he cannot help himself. Needs to be spoon fed, incapable of thinking or studying the Word on his own. He cannot grasp spiritual truth. And he certainly cannot help others, e.g. share with them the way of salvation. He likes listening to sermons, especially if they are entertaining, with lots of stories and jokes. But what he

hears never affects his life. He reads the Bible, but it has no power in his life. His Christian service is hollow. He says and does what is expected, but it's not really him. In his Christian life, he says and does the right thing if someone is watching, but that's not what he is really like. His words and deeds are like artificial fruit tied onto the tree for an occasion.

Things are not right with others. **Since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly?** (1 Corinthians 3:3). The way he talks and thinks of others, especially if they are rivals, is no different from the people in the world. He is quarrelsome, prickly, he will remember this slight and that offence, regurgitate what so and so said years ago, and hold it against him for evermore. If someone's words are ambiguous, he will always assume the worst possible meaning and construction. He is consumed with jealousy at someone else's success.

He has no deep knowledge of the Lord, and does not delight himself in the Lord. Hence his prayer-life is limited, it is a burden and a duty, and his heart is not in it. He has no strong relationship with God; God is not at the centre of all he does. Therefore he is no different from the people of the world, for he has the same pleasures, homes, interests, conversations and appearance. People ask, "Is he really a Christian?"

Like a baby, his little world centres on himself and his petty wants. The problem is that though he is a Christian, he has not developed. He has not grown after the first year. All he does is go round in circles. Babies are wonderful; we delight in their looks, their movements, their first words, and their first steps. But supposing they were still babies after five years. It would be a tragedy, we would feel so sorry for the parents. It is equally sad that in many churches, there are members who are Christians (just) but are still babies; refusing to grow up and often unaware that anything is wrong. They are quite satisfied and pleased with themselves. They say to themselves, "I'm better than a good many I could mention".

This is such a dangerous position. Orthodox, yet carnal. They can have all the external gifts, but still be babies. The gifts of the Spirit, but none of the graces of the Spirit. The source of the problem is that though they have been born of the Holy Spirit, they do not walk in the Spirit, they are not led by the Spirit, nor filled by the Spirit. Basically and essentially ruled by self. They plan for themselves, rely on their own power, they run the controls. Though God is in their life, He does not have access everywhere.

The spiritual Christian

This is the Christian who is not only born of and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but is controlled and led and mastered by the Spirit. In his life, the Holy Spirit is not quenched or grieved. The spiritual Christian not only possesses the Spirit, but also is possessed by the Holy Spirit. N.B. he is not sinless or perfect. He still finds the power of the devil very strong. He knows he is in a battle; in fact life is a continuous battle. He still has a lot to learn, and is very aware of his mistakes and failings. But he is not going round in circles, going over the same ground, or putting on an act.

There is progress and growth. His knowledge and growth in the Lord is deepening. He has joy and satisfaction in the Lord Jesus Christ, and enjoys fellowship with Him. The

Word of God is not just a perfunctory read, but power in his life. His prayer life may halt and stumble, and is certainly not polished, but it is a reality. It is not merely a duty to be observed. There is freedom and delight in talking to God. Christ does increase, and self decreases. Open sin is less frequent, secret sin is less ensnaring. He can help himself, does not need to be spoon fed, and can teach and be a blessing to others.

His Christian life is genuine, not mere imitation fruit tied on to the tree just because someone is watching. He genuinely hungers for the Word, and wants to go into the depths, not just the shallows. Though conflict gets worse, he has the peace of God in the midst. He has a passion for God and for His glory. He is glad when God is blessing someone else, because God's name is being honoured. He is not concerned about his own name and his own prominence.

That man or woman is recognizable as a Christian. He does not need to tell anyone, for he is different, and people can tell he has got something they have not got, especially in times of trouble or set-back. He is an enigma, and people are curious. The disciples were first known as Christians – Christ's ones – at Antioch. The spiritual Christian is drawing on unseen spiritual resources which the world and the carnal Christian know nothing about. It is not that he tries harder or is more serious minded. But his life and personality are open to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He allows the Holy Spirit to do in his life what He was given for.

Into which category am I to be put?

For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword.... It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

Of these three categories, to which do you belong? Are you the natural man, with no spiritual life, dead in trespasses and sins? You need God to work a miracle in your life. This is the miracle of new birth. Ask God to open your eyes and lead you to His Son, in whom there is life.

Or are you a Christian, but conscious of barrenness in your Christian life? Deep down, do you feel frustration and defeat? Is the Christian life and service an awful burden? In your honest moments, are you disappointed with your experience of Christianity? "The right side of Calvary, but the wrong side of Pentecost", as someone has put it.

Or are you a Christian who, though conscious of not being all you should be, is striving to grow in your Christian life, loving the Lord, getting on in spiritual things? Is your greatest longing to know Him and please Him and enjoy Him? Is the best part of your day when you are with Him and in His Word? Here is the spiritual Christian. But be careful not to be proud and self satisfied. Walk humbly with God. **Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour** (1 Peter 5:8).

But lets go back to those who know the Lord, but know there is something very wrong at the heart, though you put on a good show on the outside. What place does the Lord have in your life? Who is at the core and the centre? Is it God, His cause, His glory and His Gospel? Even if you admit that He is not in the centre, it is no use

thinking “I must put more effort in”, “I must pray harder”, “I will turn over a new leaf”. On your own, you cannot raise yourself up to a different level. Only God can do it. You need to die, with all your resolutions and rolling up of your sleeves, and become nothing. Your strong self has to be broken. **I have been crucified with Christ... Not I but Christ lives in me** (Galatians 2:20). Ask the Lord Jesus to take complete control of your life, to cleanse you and fill you with His power. He must have His way in your life and take over the management. The clay has to be put in the potter’s hands. Your will must be yielded. He must have the key to every room in the house. Then progress and growth will be possible.

There is a cross and a throne in every life. Your self must be on the cross, and Christ must be on the throne. You cannot achieve this on your own, but God will send down what you need. He can give you liberty in prayer, delight in the Lord, a spiritual mind and a spiritual appetite. But you have got to get out of the way. God must have first place in your life, your decisions and choices.