

September 27th, 2020

# How Not to Be a Carnal Christian

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

## Carnal Christian?

I need to explain my title before we dive in. There has been a debate within evangelicalism for some time under the name of “Lordship Salvation” or “Easy Believism.” One side of the debate is fundamentally wrong. They claim that a person “...can be a Christian without being a follower of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> A person can be saved, but completely carnal, completely given over to the flesh. In other words, you can be a carnal Christian, that is, you can have faith without works; you can have grace without repentance; you can have Jesus as Savior but reject Him as Lord. Reformed theology rightly rejects this view outright.

## The carnal Corinthian

Now Paul in our passage today, calls these Christians “carnal.” Three times in fact: in v.1, and twice in v.3, he calls them people of the *flesh*. “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the *flesh*...” The Greek word is σάρκινος *sarkinos* and it means carnal or fleshly. It is opposed to being spiritual. It’s the worldly nature. So, in effect, he’s calling them carnal Christians. But not in the way that easy believism would have us to think. Paul is calling them to repentance *precisely* because it is a contradiction to be carnal and to be *in Christ*.

## Position vs. condition

Remember the doctrine of our position and our condition? Our position as Christians, is that we are saved, sanctified, and seated with Christ in the Heavenly places. Why? Because a Christian has come into union with the Lord

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<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice in John MacArthur’s *The Gospel According to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), pg. xi

Jesus Christ. This union is invincible. We are Christ's own body and He can not amputate us. That's our new identity. Just like Paul we can say of ourselves, "It is no longer I who live, *but Christ who lives in me.*" (**Galatians 2:20**). That is our position. And Paul makes it clear that these Corinthians were *positionally* in Christ. Notice at the end of v.1 he reminds them, albeit in the form of a rebuke, that they are *in Christ*. He says you are "infants *in Christ*." Now it's because of their position that Paul calls them to pay attention to their condition. Our condition deals with our present state, our behavior, our way of thinking, our Christian walk. Paul is telling them, their condition is carnal, fleshly worldly. At the end of v.3, he says "are you not of the flesh and *behaving only in a human way?*" Paul is rebuking them because their carnal living (their condition) was warring against their being in Christ (their position).

### **Are you a carnal Christian?**

The question for us today is this: are you and I carnal Christians? Certainly we are all prone to this, and to some extent this is the battle that we will be entangled with all the way until glory. The question is this: are you aware of your carnality? Or are you blind to it? That was the problem with the Corinthians. They thought that they were mature, and wise, and sophisticated. The last thing they would have thought was that they were fleshly babes in Christ. Dear congregation, here's my first exhortation to you this morning: Let your guard down. Don't think this message is for your neighbor. Invite the Holy Spirit to show you the blind spots of your heart. Ask Him to show you the ways in which you are behaving like a *mere* human. Ask Him to show you how you can live more in step with your new identity in Christ.

### *The Big Idea...*

The fight against carnal christianity consists in seeing ourselves as nothing and Christ as everything

- ☆The Nature of a Carnal Christian (v.1-2)
- ☆The Signs of a Carnal Christian (v.3-4)
- ☆The Cure for a Carnal Christian (v.5-9)

## I. The Nature of a Carnal Christian

### **Context, context, context**

One of the things that Paul was accused of by some in the Corinthian Church was his so-called weakness in speech. In **2 Corinthians 10:10** he repeats what was said against him: “For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and *his speech of no account.*”<sup>2</sup> The issue was, factions was lining up behind their favorite teachers in the Church based on the way they could speak. That’s why he spent all of chapter two defending the mode of his preaching. Now Paul aims right at their heart. This is a deliciously logic approach. First, he addressed the true nature of preaching, and *now* he show us the disease that caused such base thinking.

### **“Brothers!”**

Please look with me at v.1 “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.” The harshness of this rebuke is only softened by the use of the word brothers. He’s firing with both barrels at the gross way in which they are carrying on, yet he doesn’t disown them. He puts himself on the same level. What a model for us dear congregation. If I need to be rebuked, please address me as your brother. This is how we are act towards those caught in sin. **Galatians 6:1** “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him *in a spirit of gentleness.*” Though Paul is rebuking them, he never loses his affection for them.

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<sup>2</sup> Also see 2 Corinthians 11:6

### They weren't spiritual?

Continuing forward, Paul says he “could not address [them] as spiritual people.” Now if you remember in chapter two, he compared the natural person (the unsaved person) in v.14 with the spiritual person (the Christian) in v.15. But now he's in effect saying they are not spiritual people. Does he mean that they are not Christians? Clearly not. Paul's using the word differently. In chapter 2 he was using the word “spiritual” to speak of one's position in Christ. Here in chapter 3, he is using the word “spiritual” to speak of one's condition in Christ.

### Babies in Christ

In this sense, they weren't spiritual, rather they were “people of the flesh” v. 1 says, and “infants in Christ.” Think carefully about what he's saying here. Paul is not rebuking the Corinthians for being baby Christians when they first came to the Lord. He's rebuking them for *staying* baby Christians. In v.1 he's speaking about when he first arrived at Corinth, how he had to address them as those coming out of the world, as new born Christians. That's what they were. And that is wonderful. Nobody should rebuke a baby Christian in this sense for not understanding and behaving like a mature Christian. That would be like rebuking a 6 month old for not cleaning up his room. No the problem was that they stayed babies. Look at v.2 “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. *And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh.*” Do you hear his exasperation? He wasn't troubled that they began as babes, he's troubled that after years, they remained babes. As one author said “Nothing is more precious or wonderful than a little baby. But a twenty-year old with the mind of an infant is heartbreaking. A baby who acts like a baby is a joy, but an adult who acts like a baby is a tragedy.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, (Chicago, IL.: Moody Publishers, 1984), pg. 72

### **1st principle: old Christians can be babies**

And so we arrive at our first principle: “Old Christians”—meaning those who have been Christians for a long time—can be still be baby Christians. Paul is astonished *precisely* because of this point. The Corinthians had not matured. So undeceive yourselves dear congregation. Realize this about yourself, the number of years you have been a Christian doesn’t mean that you are mature. How long did the disciples walk with Jesus, and yet how many times do we see them breaking out in spiritual temper tantrums? Do you think they thought they were mature? Do you think they would have thought they acting like babies? I’m afraid that some of you may be immune to the regular preaching of the word, because you think that you are mature, and you don’t need this stuff. That is the very definition of baby-ish, carnal thinking.<sup>4</sup>

### **Milk vs. meat**

Now when Paul first arrived at Corinth, he fed them a very particular diet. Please look at v.2 “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.” What does Paul mean by milk and meat here? First, what does it not mean? I remember a pastor used to say that “meat is doing the stuff,” meaning the “meat” is getting out and being Jesus to the world. This won’t work with the passage, because Paul is specifically referring to his teaching, not the good works Christians should be doing. Neither can the distinction between milk and meat mean what the gnostics believed, namely, that the milk is for the uninitiated, the unlearned, the lower tier; while the meat is for the initiated, the intelligent, those on the top tier. No, we can understand what milk and meat mean by simply meditating on the analogy. What do milk and meat have in common? They are both types of food. They feed and give strength and give energy. How are they different? Milk is for babies who can’t chew up their food, and meat is for the mature who can. The conclusion is simply this: all Christians eat the same thing: food. But not all Christians can eat it in the same

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<sup>4</sup> **Romans 12:3** exhorts us “...I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment...”

manner. In other words, every Christian gets the same truth, to some it comes in the form of milk, others in the form of meat. As Calvin famously said “Christ is milk for babes, and strong meat for men.”<sup>5</sup> Which simply means this: “Every doctrine which can be taught to theologians, [can be] taught to children.”<sup>6</sup> Listen to how Charles Hodge puts it:

“We teach a child that God is a Spirit, every where present and knowing all things; and he understands it. We tell him that Christ is God and man in two distinct natures and one person for ever. This to the child is milk, but it contains food for angels. The truth expressed in these propositions may be expanded indefinitely, and furnish nourishment for the highest intellects to eternity. The difference between milk and strong meat...is simply the difference between the more or less perfect development of the things taught.”<sup>7</sup>

Paul’s rebuke against the Corinthians was not because they needed milk at the beginning of their walk, his rebuke was that they still needed milk now. Why? Beginning of v.3, “[because] you are still of the flesh.” They had *remained* carnal. They remained σάρκινοσ sarkinos.

### **What is nature of the carnal Christian?**

So then, what does it mean to be carnal? What is the nature of it? To be carnal or fleshly doesn’t begin with our behavior. There are some who want to teach that carnal Christianity is *merely* drunkenness, or sexual immorality and the like. But these things are only the effects. Jesus taught that it was what comes

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2018), pg. 49

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

—“There is no difference at all between the truths of a spiritual milk diet and a spiritual solid food diet, except in detail and depth. All doctrine may have both milk and meat elements. It is not that we are to be continually learning new doctrines in order to grow, but that we are learning more about the doctrines we have known for many years.” MacArthur, pg. 71

*from the heart* that defiles us.<sup>8</sup> Meaning it is our *thinking* and *believing* that is carnal before we ever starting *acting* in a carnal way.

### **David the carnal Christian**

Let's turn to 1 **Samuel 27** for an example of this. Here's the context, King Saul was trying to kill David because he was jealous of him. David had already been on the lam from Saul for year, running from this place to that place in the wilderness. Up to this point, David had continued to place his trust in God to deliver him. In 1 **Samuel 23**, Saul was coming to entrap David in the city of Keilah, and David prayed and asked God what to do. And God instructed him. But here, in 1 Samuel 27 David had reached the point of spiritual, mental, and physical exhaustion, so he does something different. Please look at v.1 "Then David *said in his heart*, "Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand." From this one decision, a whole avalanche of disaster came upon David, not the least of which is that his camp is raided in 1 Samuel 30, and all their wives and children were carried off, and their property was burned. What did David do wrong? He was carnal. What?! "Pastor Josh I would agree if you said David was carnal when he slept with Bathsheba and killed Uriah, but how can you say he was carnal here?" Look at v.1 again. "Then David *said in his heart...*" He didn't consult the Lord on what he should do, like times before. He made his plans according to the way thinks. He didn't trust in the Lord with all his heart, but he leaned on his own understanding.<sup>9</sup> That's the essence of being carnal. To be carnal means to accept the world's definition of things, to measure reality the way the world does, to have the same goals as the world does.<sup>10</sup> That's precisely what the Corinthians were doing.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 15:19 "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander."

<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 3:5

<sup>10</sup> MacArthur, pg. 68

They were measuring their Christian experience the way that the world thinks. They judged preaching the way the world judges preaching—was this message intellectual enough, emotive enough, funny enough, practical enough, relevant enough? Likewise they judged each other the way the world judges one another—are they of my group, my age, do they have my skin color, my economic status, my same hobbies? In other words, the Corinthians were carnal in their hearts and in their minds, long before it ever came out in their actions.

## **2nd principle: every Christian is prone to carnal thinking**

This brings us to our second principle: every Christian is *prone* to carnal thinking. Prone meaning inclined, or predisposed. What did the Corinthians have to do to turn carnal? Nothing. It was their default position. And you are prone to this same type of carnal Christianity. Why? Because dead fish always float down stream.<sup>11</sup> They don't have to do anything, the current simply takes them in that direction. Beloved you and I don't have to do anything to be carnal. It is our default position. It takes no effort. Since we still have the old sinful nature still present, we naturally want to go down stream, we naturally want to reason in our own heart. The Corinthians are a picture of us, if we are simply left alone. That's our **first point**. A Christian is carnal in his thinking long before it ever turns into behavior. And this is what every every Christian is prone to.

## II. The Signs of a Carnal Christian

A Christian can be carnal and not know that about themselves. The Corinthians failed to see this. They thought they were mature. So Paul proves his charge by giving them three evidences. These are the three signs of a carnal Christian.

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<sup>11</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Flowers from a Puritan's Garden: Illustrations and Meditations*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2017), pg. 3



### 1st sign of a carnal Christian: jealousy

Please look at **v.3** “For while there is *jealousy* and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” Being jealous is a proof of being carnal. What is jealousy? The Greek word is ζήλος *zēlos*. Most of us probably limit jealousy to that of man and woman relationships. A husband can become jealous if another man shows undue attention to his own wife. Or a wife can be jealous when her husband shows attention to another woman. But jealousy extends beyond man and wife.

Jealousy is an invisible passion of the heart which arises when you think someone else may rob you of some advantage that you desire for yourself.<sup>12</sup>

### Jealousy: the greatest evil

The NT considers jealousy such a vile thing that it places next to drunkenness and sexual immorality (**Romans 13:13; Galatians 5:19-21**).<sup>13</sup> The Puritan Richard Sibbes said that nothing has caused more bloodshed in the world since its beginning than jealousy.<sup>14</sup>

Jealousy is what loosed Satan from Heaven to devour the nations. **Isaiah 14:12-13** “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, *you who laid the nations low!* You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high.’”

Jealousy is what led King Saul to murder 85 priests, and all the men, women, children and infants at the city of Nob in **1 Samuel 22**. Why? Because a priest name Ahimelech the priest prayed for him, and Saul in his jealous rage believed that if David received any help, it meant the end of his own kingdom.

Jealousy is what incited King Herod to murder babies. **Matthew 2:16**

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<sup>12</sup> Webster’s 1828

<sup>13</sup> Jealousy is so wicked because the jealous man enters into God’s throne, and judges the thoughts, purposes, and intentions of another man. Richard Sibbes, *The Works of Richard Sibbes Vol. 3*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2001), pg. 340

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, pg. 486

“[When] Herod...saw that he had been tricked by the wise men [that is they did not return to Jerusalem to tell him where the Christ child was] he became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under.” All because he was jealous to hold on to his own power. Isn't it obvious that it is jealousy that is driving our own politics right now? There are politicians who are willing for the country to burn to the ground if it means power for them. **James 3:16** says “For where *jealousy* and selfish ambition exist, *there will be disorder and every vile practice.*”

### **How do you know if you are jealous?**

There was jealousy in the Corinthian Church. That will be clear in the next two signs. The question here is: how do we know if you have a jealous spirit? You are jealous if you have grown suspicious of others. King Saul first step towards jealousy was that he was suspicious that David was going to steal the kingdom from him. Remember the women sang that Saul killed thousands, but David ten thousands. Saul said to himself “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?” (1 **Samuel 18:8**). Loved ones, are you suspicious of other people in the Church? Do you suspect ill of them, do you read into their attention to others or their lack of attention towards you? Another way to tell if you have a jealous spirit is if your love for them has grown cold. If you are free of jealousy, you will rejoice when others advance and succeed and are given honor. But if not, you will dislike it when they succeed, and rejoice when they fail. As one Puritan said, “Suspicion is the very venom of love and friendship.”<sup>15</sup> That's the **first sign** of a carnal Christian: jealousy. The more conformed you are to Christ, the less jealous you will be; the less conformed you are to Christ, the more jealous you will be.

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, pg. 487

## 2nd sign of a carnal Christian: strife

The second thing Paul mentions in **v.3** is strife: “For while there is jealousy and *strife* among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” Jealousy is the invisible root, but strife is the fruit.<sup>16</sup> What is strife? The Greek word is ἔρις eris. Interestingly, this is where the Greek god of war gets his name—Ares. That’s what strife is: war, wrangling, contention. Specifically it is contention for superiority—superiority of *self*. Strife is the result of putting self at the center of your life. That’s why Paul called them infants. Have you ever noticed that babies are almost totally concerned with themselves? A baby’s “...whole concern is with its own comfort, hunger, attention, and sleep.”<sup>17</sup> That’s how a carnal Christian operates—his whole concern is with himself, and when others don’t treasure him the same way he treasures himself, strife is the result. When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father loved him most of all, they hated Joseph and sold him into slavery (**Genesis 37**). Their jealousy gave birth to strife. The sons of Korah accused Moses and Aaron of “...exalting [themselves] above the assembly of the Lord” (**Numbers 16:3**). So contentious was their strife that they stirred up 250 other men against the Lord’s servant. God punished this strife by opening up the ground and swallowing them alive. Dear congregation, some of you are in bondage to strife right now. It’s true that sometimes we are in strife because it is brought on by outside forces. Jesus was thrust into strife during his whole ministry, and clearly it wasn’t His doing. However to the degree that we put ourselves at the center, is to the degree that we are causing strife. Ask yourselves, how has strife ever brought anything good about in your life? What good can you point to that strife has borne? That’s the **second sign** of a carnal Christian: strife.

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<sup>16</sup> James 2:2 "You covet (ζηλόω zēloō) and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel (that is, there is strife among you)."

<sup>17</sup> MacArthur, pg. 73

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Additionally if we press the analogy further, we know that babies don’t have the ability to rightly value things. If you put \$100 bill and a bright red squeaky ball in front of them, what are they going to grab? Clearly the ball. Carnal Christians don’t rightly value spiritual things, they are fighting over the toys when treasure is offered to them.

### 3rd sign of a carnal Christian: party spirit

Please look at v.4 “For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?” Paul addresses many problems in this letter. In chapter 5 he addresses the Corinthians refusal to practice church discipline; in chapter 6 he addresses their sexual immorality; in chapter 8 he addresses christian liberty; in chapter 11 he addresses the abuse of the Lord’s supper; and in chapter 15 he addresses the heresy surrounding our resurrection. Why does he address this problem of party spirit at the beginning of the letter? Doesn’t it seem like those other problems are more destructive? I don’t think this is not where I would start. But I would be wrong. This is the most foundational problem the Corinthians faced. If this problem doesn’t get corrected first, then all the other problems can’t get addressed. Why do I say that? Because when you say “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos” who must you de-throne? God. Christ. This was Paul’s logic in chapter 1. He asked “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1:13). In other words, to be of a party spirit means that whoever is the head of your party is your functional savior, your functional Lord. That’s why Paul says in v.4 “when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” *are you not being merely human?*” In other words, that’s what the unsaved person does—they deny the Lordship of Christ, they deny that He is the King of kings, and Lord of lords, because they have an imposter at the head of their own party. Until Christ is all, none of the other problems in your life can truly be solved. Loved ones, is Christ the one you follow? Is He Lord? Test yourself. It’s easy to follow those things in Scripture that are agreeable to your preference, but what about those things that you don’t like? If we only follow the things we like in Scripture, then it is not Christ we are following, we are following our own preferences. That’s how a carnal Christian—a mere infant in Christ—behaves. That’s the **third sign** of a carnal Christian: party spirit. So let’s look at how Scripture seeks to cure us of this.

### III. The Cure for a Carnal Christian

#### A broad spectrum cure

The particular carnality of the Corinthians was their wrong views of their ministers. They viewed them as rival speakers, much like the rival philosophers of their day. So they lined up behind their favorite, and demonized the other minister and their followers. So Paul is going to correct this. Now maybe you're saying to yourself 'I don't have a problem idolizing pastors.' Praise God. Perhaps your particular problem is failing to recognize anything special about the work of the ministry. Either way Paul gives us a broad cure that applies to several different species of carnal Christianity. Paul gives us five cures, and each cure the answer is the same, turn your eyes away from mere men to the living God.

#### Cure #1: Ministers are servants, God is sovereign

Please look at v.5 "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each." Notice first he doesn't say "*Who* is Apollos [or] *Who* is Paul?" He says "What" are these men? Why is that important? Because a carnal Christian will focus upon their personalities, but Paul is saying, "No, pay attention to the office they hold, not the *who*, but the *what*."<sup>18</sup> He then answers his own question. What are these men? "Servants through whom you believed..." The word for servants is δῆκονος diakonos, where we get the word deacon. But in Scripture it is used not only of the office of deacon, but also as a very lowly servant. In **John 2:5**, at the wedding in Cana, Mary instructed the δῆκονος diakonos—the servants—to do whatever Jesus told them. At this wedding diakonos were the most menial workers, the lowest of the low, probably lower than table waiters, more like busboys. Paul and Apollos and every minister after them are busboys. The glory of their work is

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<sup>18</sup> Kim Riddlebarger, *The Lectio Continua: Expository Commentary on the New Testament: First Corinthians*, (Powder Springs, GA.: Tolle Lege Press, 2013), pg. 82

that God assigned it to them, that's how v.5 ends: "...the Lord assigned to each." And through their work we have believed the gospel. In that respect, it is a soul altering, destiny shaping work. However, these busboys didn't make the Heavenly bread that gives you eternal life. They merely serve at the beck and call of the Master. So Paul is essentially saying "No one builds a movement around a waiter or a busboy, or erects monuments to them. Apollos and I are just waiters or busboys whom the Lord used as servants..."<sup>19</sup> God and His Christ are the Lords of this feast. We were appointed *merely* to bring you food—to bring you to Him—so that you could believe.<sup>20</sup> Therefore stop looking at the slave labor, look to the sovereign Lord.'

### **Cure #2: Ministers are contingent, God is causal**

Now in each following cure, Paul puts Apollos and himself in a lower position than the preceding cure. Notice what he says here in v.6 "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." He changes the imagery. Now it's a vast plantation in which he and Apollos are manual laborers<sup>21</sup> or unskilled farm workers.<sup>22</sup> They are merely digging holes, burying the seed, and watering it. Now those of you who are farmers are probably offended at the simplicity of how I characterized this. Paul's point is not to say this is mindless work, nor that it doesn't require great skill. Rather his point is that this type of work can't cause the seed to grow. Ministers are *contingent*, meaning they are completely dependent on God for the outcome. God alone is the efficient cause, He alone gives the growth. I think that many of us city folk are functional deists when it comes to farming and food. One author said "We tend to think of the growth of pants as automatic: if the soil, seed and nutrients are right, and there is enough

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<sup>19</sup> MacArthur, pg. 74

<sup>20</sup> "Ministers are mere instruments in the hands of God. The doctrines which they preach are no their own discoveries, and the power which renders their preaching successful is not in them." Hodge, pg. 51

<sup>21</sup> Roy E. Ciampa & Brian S. Rosner, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The First Letter to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), pg. 145

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, pg. 144

rain and sun, the crops grow; it is as simple as that.”<sup>23</sup> But this is false. A farmer can have the greatest skill and greatest wisdom, but can he cause the sun to rise in the morning? Can he cause the seed to secretly sprout in the depths of the earth? Can he cause the process of photosynthesis? No, the Scripture is clear, God does all these things. **Psalm 104:14-15** “You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth.” Likewise when it comes to ministers, they can’t cause anything. They are mere instruments in God’s hand. Left by themselves, without the power of the Holy Spirit, they grow anything. It is God who gives the growth. Therefore how can you ever boast in men? Or conversely, how can you ever simply disregard the miracle of our growth?

### **Cure #3: Ministers are nothing, God is everything**

Paul makes him and Apollos even lower. Look at **v.7** “So neither he who plants nor he who waters *is anything*, but only God who gives the growth.” Paul says “ministers are nothing.” Doesn’t this seem to contradict other places where we are told to bring honor to our ministers? **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13** says to “...respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” But here Paul not only says we are less than busboys, less than unskilled farm laborers, we are nothing. How do we reconcile this? In this passage, Paul is placing ministers next to God, and comparing them to Him because that’s what the Corinthians were doing. This is what carnal Christians do. They rob God of the honor that is due Him in working grace in their lives and they heap it up on men. Nowhere does Paul deny the use of means. God has appointed means for our spiritual growth. One of those means are pastors. However, God is not dependent on means. I love how the Westminster Confession says it in 5.3 “God, in his ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet [He] is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure.” In other words, as **Hosea 1:7** God can bring victory for armies without bow or sword or war or horses or

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, pg. 146

horsemen. Likewise God doesn't need ministers. Compared to Him, they are nothing. They can't provide anything that He couldn't do Himself. Which shows all the more the grace of God in giving this ministry. As Calvin says "God could accomplish this work entirely himself, he calls us, puny mortals, to be as it were his [co-workers], and makes use of us as instruments."<sup>24</sup> Which should make us all the more to take our eyes of mere men and look to Him!<sup>25</sup>

#### **Cure #4: Ministers are measured by God not man**

Please look at v.8 "He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor." What does he mean by saying "He who plants and he who waters *are one*?" Well the Corinthians were lifting up their favorite leader based on their distinctiveness from other teachers. On one level, Paul recognizes that ministers do have distinctions—some plant, some water. But here he's stressing what they have in common. All faithful ministers are servants and are dependent upon the Lord for their success, and they provide something God's people need. In other words, they are one in accomplishing God's work. No one can pit church planting against evangelism, or catechizing against counseling, every part of their work is part of the whole that God determined. So for anyone to elevate one leader over against another would be like saying, "look how much better my right arm is than my left arm." Not only that, but Paul implies that we do not even have the ability to rightly assess them. Beloved if God is responsible for the growth, how can you ever look at a minister and make a right judgment about his effectiveness? Think about his example. You have two ministers: the prophet Jeremiah and the prophet Jonah. Jeremiah labored for decades and saw virtually no success. Jonah reluctantly labored for a few days and saw the biggest revival in the OT. How will God reward them? According to their success? No according to their labor. That's what the end of v.8. But don't you see, much of the labor of a

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<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XX*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 131

<sup>25</sup> "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine." Psalm 50:10-12



minister is hidden from us. How do we know they are being faithful? Maybe they are just like Jonah, whom God is blessing in spite of themselves. If that is true, that we can't rightly assess a minister, how can we possibly choose one over another?<sup>26</sup>

### **Cure #5: All Christians belong to God**

Lastly look at v.9 "For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building." How a person identified themselves in the ancient world was just as important as how a person identifies themselves today. A person's worth is wrapped up in their identity, who they perceive themselves to be, and who the world perceives them to be. The more identity currency you have, the more worth you have. I would suggest that one of the reasons that there has been such an increase of homosexuality and transgenderism among young people today is because they are starving for the world to tell them that they have worth. It's not enough to be normal anymore. If you are normal, you are a nobody. You have to have a certain sexual identity in order to have worth. Likewise in the Church, every Christian desires to have worth. And so a carnal Christian will use the categories of the world to increase his sense of worth. That's why party spirit existed in Corinth. Their identity was defined by answering the question: "Who do I belong to?"<sup>27</sup> All along they have been saying "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos." Paul, in the shocking conclusion to this section turns their argument around. No, he says, you don't belong to any man. You belong to God. Three times he emphasizes it in v.9 "For *we are God's* fellow workers. *You are God's* field, *God's* building." In the Greek, εἰμί eimi θεός theos εἰμί eimi θεός theos εἰμί eimi θεός theos. 'We belong to God, you belong to God, you belong to God' God-willing we will deal with the imagery next time. But let this shock you. Where does your worth come from beloved? It doesn't come from anything in this world. It doesn't come from which club

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<sup>26</sup> "The faithful, laborious minister or missionary who labors in obscurity and without apparent fruit, will meet a reward far beyond that of those who, with less self-denial and effort, are made the instruments of great results." Hodge, pg. 53

<sup>27</sup> Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 149

you belong to, or whether or not you have better stuff or spiritual gifts than the next guy. All of that is irrelevant. If you are building your identity on those things, you are a fool. Loved ones, here is your identity: You belong to God. Even when you are a carnal Christian. Even when you are acting like a baby. Even when you are being jealous and striving with others, even when you are dividing into factions. Don't you see? This is the greatest cure to your carnality. You don't have to find worth in the same way the world does. God already owns you loved ones. You are not your own, but you belong body and soul, both life and death to your faithful savior Jesus Christ who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all your sins. He redeemed you from all the power of the devil. He preserves you. He sustains you. He is preparing for your arrival in glory. What greater identity could you want? You belong to him. He loved you and gave Himself up for your sins. Why would you ever want to identify with something or someone else.

### **To those who have no identity**

Dear unbelieving friend, who do you belong to? What is your identity? Where do you find worth? If you are outside of Jesus Christ, you don't have an identity that will survive. The Scripture says that when the wicked die, they will no longer [be] remembered but are broken like a tree.<sup>28</sup> That is your future. But God has sent His Son into the world, the Lord Jesus Christ, and He was broken upon a tree, the cross, in order to save sinners like you and me. And then He rose from the dead three days later to prove that God has accepted His payment. He is a crucified savior for sinners like you. If you trust Him, and believe upon His name, He will put away all your sins, and give you all His righteousness. And you will have an identity that will never pass away, never rot, never be broken.

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<sup>28</sup> Job 24:20

