

GROW UP!

Text: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Read: Colossians 1:24-2:5

1: Principles for Christian growth

God expects us to grow

God expects us to move from milk to solids

2: Principles for Christian service

God is Number 1

We're his servants

Serving one purpose

But with different abilities/tasks

And yet God's fellow workers

And so: Grow & Serve!

Dear Congregation

Just as we started to wonder if this letter was ever going to get back to the issue of divisions in the church, it does.

Not that it ever left that, really. In the last chapter and a half it has been dealing with the wrong thinking and attitudes that caused the divisions in Corinth which are often still at the heart of division in churches today. And we've also looked at the Christlike thinking and attitudes that are the solution.

But finally here in chapter 3, we get back to the outworking of that kind of wrong thinking. And *out of this passage comes principles for Christian growth and service* that are just as relevant for us as for them.

Point 1

You get the idea that if Paul was only allowed to use two words at this point in the letter, they would have been, "**Grow up!**" His message to the Corinthians was, stop acting like spiritual babies! Start acting like spiritual adults!

They're words that all of us have probably heard as kids ourselves when we weren't acting our age, or have used ourselves as adults, begging others that should know better not to be so childish.

Many of the folk in Corinth had now been Christians for at least 2 or 3 years. It was time for them to grow up and stop acting the way they had when they had first come to faith. Paul would have agreed with the guy who said, 'The largest room in the world is the room for improvement.'

Fortunately Paul was allowed to use more than 2 words here, and so along with his appeal comes 2 principles for Christian growth.

The *first* one is simply that ***God does expect us to grow up as Christians***. It's OK to be a babe in Christ when you first come to faith, but not a few years down the track when you should be well on the way to maturity.

And so it's encouraging when you see new Christians in the church getting stuck into their Bibles, attending church every Sunday, spending regular time in prayer, and making the most of the Christian company they keep, asking questions, talking about the issues of day to day life and wanting to know God's perspective on them, growing in the way they think about things, getting more involved in the life of church and kingdom, wanting to serve God in the ways that they can. They're growing up as Christians. As a simple, sincere, woman once put it, 'I ain't what I oughter be; and I ain't what I'm gonna be; but I sure ain't what I was!'

On the other hand, it's a real disappointment when you see other people who've been Christians for years not growing like that. Still approaching life in the same way they did 10, 20, 30 years ago, taking everything the Bible says with a grain of salt. Still making the same mistakes and suffering the same consequences. Not applying themselves to growing up in faith.

You start to realise that Christian Growth takes application. Time, by itself, isn't going to automatically bring anyone to greater maturity. You have to apply yourself, work at it. We possibly all know some overgrown kids - they should be adults by now but they still act like kids. And in the same way we can stay spiritual babes in Christ if we don't work at growing spiritually.

The *second* related principle here is that ***God expects us to move on from milk to solid food***.

I have vague memories of some of my kids going through that stage. For the first 5 months or so of their life they only drank milk. Then they start on rice cereal. Then they moved on to pureed potato, pumpkin,

apple. And before you knew it, they're cutting their teeth on steak.

Milk is fine for babies, but at some point you've got to move on.

And so Paul had happily fed his converts spiritual milk when he started the church in Corinth. He'd taught them the elementary basics of the gospel. That was fine when they were new-born Christians. But they should have moved on from that by now, and they hadn't. They hadn't applied themselves. They hadn't allowed the gospel to continue to transform the way they thought and lived. In fact they still weren't ready for solid food.

Paul knew that from the news that had been coming to him out of Corinth. The divisions, the personality cults, the jealousy, the fighting, the slogans, 'I follow Paul', 'I follow Apollos'. They were all symptoms that they were still thinking the way they had before they had become Christians. Paul even calls them worldly, fleshly, not committed to God but to other things. One person says that the problem comes out clearly in the resounding 'I' that every slogan starts with. They weren't committed first to God and then secondly to others – they were thinking of themselves.

But then, where are we in that regard? Are those of us who have been Christians for years still spinning our wheels on the elementary basics of the gospel? Are we happy just paddling around in the shallows of the gospel? It's enough for us just to be saved?

Or are we wading out into deeper water, wanting to plumb the depths of what God wants us to know and be and do for him? Cooperating with the Holy Spirit as he works in us to change us at the deepest level? Wanting to be used by God to influence the people around us with the gospel?

Someone once said, 'Conversion is only 5% of the Christian life. 95% is going on [from there] with Christ.'

Do you see yourself growing in the fruit of the Spirit like –love, joy, peace, patience, self-control, instead of the fruit of the sinful nature like - hate, discord, jealousy, rage, selfish ambition, division? Are you

more committed than a few years ago to living your life for God, serving the gospel with the abilities and opportunities he gives you? Can you look back over the past few years and see yourself growing to be more like Jesus? Can others see it? Or are you having trouble moving on from the ‘babe in Christ’ stage?

Point 2

And then as well as these principles for Christian growth, the other thing you find here is *principles for Christian service*. And there are 5 of them.

First of all, **God is sovereign**. He comes first. He’s our first priority in everything – the king of creation and king of his church. He’s the important one, not us.

Someone who needed reminding of that was Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. At the point that he was most proud of his own power and the glory of his empire, God reduced him to the level of an animal, reminding him that even kings of world empires are subject to the all-sovereign God.

Then secondly, that means that **we’re God’s servants**. Some of the Corinthians were holding up Paul as their hero, or Apollos. But Paul and Apollos were nothing but servants of God.

And we’re possibly so used to talking about ourselves as God’s servants that it doesn’t mean much to us anymore. But in Paul’s day slavery and servants were a reality. They were at their master’s bidding 24 hours a day. He had the right of life or death over them. They hardly had a life of their own. Many of them were on the lowest rungs of society.

And so, to Paul’s way of thinking, putting a servant on the pedestal just didn’t make sense – you exalt the master, not the servant. As someone has said, ‘A growing Christian is like a church steeple: the closer he gets to heaven, the smaller he becomes in his own estimation.’

Principle 3 is that **all God’s servants serve the one purpose**. In fact Paul not only says here that he and Apollos serve the one purpose, he literally says that they are one. And so, again, it doesn’t make much sense to promote one leader over another and encourage division, when they’re all one anyway.

The difficulty is that in reality there will always be differences between Christian leaders - differences in style and personality, different strengths and weaknesses. People will click more with one or another. But if everyone understands that they're all serving the one purpose anyway, those differences don't become a reason for division. In fact, those differences complement each other and become a strength.

And so the 4th principle is that ***just as God gives us different strengths and abilities, he also gives us different tasks***. Paul and Apollos may have been one, but they did have different God-given tasks.

And so, as a missionary, Paul sowed the seed of the gospel. Then, as someone more involved in ongoing ministry, Apollos watered it. Neither of them could succeed without the other. But both of them depended on God to bless their efforts and cause the watered seed to grow.

And God uses us the same way. The purpose of the church is to gather and perfect the community of believers. We gather in the elect through outreach and mission. We grow each other to maturity through ministry. We equip and train each other so that we can do these tasks well.

But even though there are different areas of service and different tasks, all the leaders involved in these different areas should be serving the one purpose of worshipping and serving God in all of life, encouraging each other on the journey, and tending and caring for creation. No individual should be put on a pedestal as someone to follow over and above anyone else.

Then the 5th and final principle is a bit surprising. We've seen that God is sovereign, and that Christians are simply his servants. But then we're told in verse 9 that even so, ***those involved in outreach and ministry have the privilege of being God's fellow-workers***. He raises us up to the position of working alongside him. It's not as if we're the reluctant workers and God is the boss cracking the whip over our bleeding backs. We're now part of a team, working together, side by side, sharing the struggles, sharing the benefits. The ongoing work of the gospel is something that we and God do together. And so, as someone has said, 'Without God, we can't, without us, he won't.'

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And so, as you see, God calls us to grow as Christians, and to serve him and each other. And all of this is our offering of ourselves as living sacrifices in worship to him.

The Christian life, 7 days a week, should involve growth, service, and worship, all at the same time. They aren't negotiables. They're things God simply expects to see.

So like the sprinter straining for the finish line, let's strive for growth. Like the faithful servant, let's offer ourselves to God as our spiritual act of worship. Let's not see these as things to try and squeeze into the spare moments of our life, or some small personal space that no one ever sees. Let's make these our priority - to serve God first, and others as ourselves.