

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

“I Can, and I’m Eager!” ... “I Can’t” ... “I Won’t” Study #3
(1 Corinthians 2:1--3:4)

Introduction: The problem only an “About Face” solves...

Over the years, my camping trips have given me great enjoyment of God’s creation, connection with trail mates, lots of spiritual refreshment, adventure...and sermon illustrations.

Like the time that I was backpacking in Colorado with my two then-teen-aged sons. We had been hiking on this one trail for a while when the trail turned in a direction I wasn’t expecting. It didn’t seem right. Something seemed off.

We stopped to check the map and saw that, sure enough, we had passed a trail crossing where we should have turned, and didn’t.

We had only hiked a few minutes past that trail, but continuing on the current path wasn’t taking us where we wanted to go. There was no choice but to turn around,

The only way forward was to backtrack. We were facing a problem that only an “About Face” would solve.

Review...

Last Sunday, we listened to the Apostle Paul, who focused on the importance of unity in Jesus’ church.

Paul told us that experiencing unity required traveling in a certain direction.

Unity comes as we remember: Jesus died for us all. We were all baptized. We all embrace the simple message of the Gospel. God delights to use “people like us” to showcase His grace and glory.

Traveling in that one direction leads to the experience of love and unity in a church.

But, having made that point, Paul didn’t drop the topic of unity.

He kept on hammering away at the problem of factions and cliques in the church and surfaced another reason why a church might have such problems.

Given the reason for the problem Paul points out today, we’ll understand that the solution isn’t to hike faster in the same direction. It’s to do what I had to do on the trail. It’s to make an About Face.

We’ll see this as we turn to the Bible. But, before we turn to 1 Corinthians, let’s take a minute to remember where Paul had been just before he traveled to Corinth.

Background: Paul’s Experience in Athens (from Acts 17:15-34)

He had been traveling with his partners in ministry, Silas, and Timothy, visiting city after city while sharing the good news of the Gospel. (The Second Missionary Journey)

After they all went to Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, Paul went - all alone - to the city of Athens.

In Athens he faced opposition as he shared Jesus with the philosophers on Mars Hill.

First, Paul laid the groundwork for what he would go on to say by speaking to them about God the Creator.

He then sought to establish credibility with them by quoting well-known Greek poets.¹

Then, Paul talked about Jesus. He told them that Jesus was the answer to the problem of sin. He said that God was going to judge the world, and that the only way to be on the right side of that judgment is to side with Jesus... whom God raised from the dead.

At the mention of the resurrection, most of the intellectuals on Mars Hill started making fun of Paul. He lost whatever credibility he had gained by just mentioning the idea of resurrection.

In the end, some in Athens believed. A small Gospel work started there. But it wasn't long before he left Athens to travel the short distance to the city of Corinth, again, alone.

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul described his frame of mind when he arrived in Corinth after his experience in Athens.

Paul's Presence In Corinth (2:1-5)

The Tone of Paul's Corinthian Ministry (2:1-3)

The message Paul brought to Corinth (vv. 1-2)

[2:1] And when I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come as someone superior in speaking ability or wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony of God.²

In Athens, he had been with the most highly educated thinkers and the most skilled speakers in the Greek world.

And Paul did his rhetorical best, his cultural and literary best - which I suspect was pretty good. But the best he could do didn't do a lot of good in Athens.

So, when he got to Corinth, he didn't try to "Wow!" them with fancy verbal footwork or rhetoric or eloquence.

His aim from the moment he arrived was to simply preach Christ, simply. Just be clear about Jesus and His Gospel. Make no attempt to be clever or cute.

While traveling from Athens to Corinth, Paul decided - in advance - what would be the scope of his preaching ministry.

[2] For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.³

The cross is the "crux" of the Gospel. That was what the Corinthians needed to hear. That was the message Paul brought.

If that was his ministry strategy, what was his emotional state when he arrived in Corinth?

The state of mind Paul brought to Corinth (v. 3)

[3] I also was with you in weakness and in fear, and in great trembling."

We may not often think of Paul as weak and wracked by fear. So...maybe we should re-think our thoughts about Paul.

It may be normal to think of Paul as a bombastic, self-confident, bull-in-a-china-shop, "my way or the highway," know-it-all.

Here, we learn that Paul had personal insecurities, self-doubts, and internal wrestling matches - just like we do.⁴

So, he pulled into Corinth at a weak point from the rigors of travel, the pressure of being an apostle, and the challenges of Athens.

¹ He quoted Epimenedes who said, "For in him (that is, god) we live and move and have our being." Also, Phaenomena who said, "For we also are his children." (both quotes are in Paul's speech on Mars Hill, Acts 17:28)

² Paul was not contrasting his evangelistic methods in Corinth with that which he employed elsewhere, but with that which others employed in Corinth.

³ Some have suggested that when he was in Athens, he did try to use superiority of speech and tried to "fight fire with fire" speaking the language of the philosophers on Mars Hill.

⁴ Three times in Acts (18:11; 23:11; 27:24) Paul received encouragement from the Lord.

And his emotionally weak condition was useful for God's purposes. Paul knew that and said as much.

Trusting in God's Power, NOT in Human Wisdom (2:4-5)

[4] and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, [5] so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of mankind, but on the power of God.

Paul's ministry was marked by signs and wonders - exorcisms, healings, and more - as the book of Acts makes clear.

So, Paul was no doubt thinking of those things. But I think that in addition to those, Paul was thinking of God's power as seen in lives changed and believers united around the message.

The Gospel brings God's power with it. Paul trusted - and we trust - not in how persuasive we can be, but in God's soul-saving, life-changing power.

The message he brought to Athens and to Corinth was powerful. It was an "out of this world" message - and that helps explain why it wasn't universally accepted.

The Message Paul Preached (2:6-9)

A Mystery Message (2:6b-8)

The wisdom Paul spoke was ***[2:6b]...a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; [7] but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory;⁵ [8] the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.***

⁵ The Gospel is no afterthought. It was something planned in the mind of God from before the world began. Interesting, too, that Paul should add the phrase, "to our glory" basically equivalent to "for our benefit/good." From before the creation of the world, God was concerned with the welfare of His people.

Jesus' Gospel is true and timely. He died and rose again at just the right time - while we were still sinners. But His Gospel isn't tied to this or to any time. It is timeless. It reflects God's eternal wisdom.

The Good News of salvation by believing in Jesus is offered to all cultures, to every people group, and to people living in every location.

Given all that, we might think that the Gospel would be happily accepted by everybody, everywhere, and all the time. Far from it.

Jesus and His message were so misunderstood that the Roman and Jewish rulers killed Him, not realizing that He was "***the Lord of glory.***"⁶

They totally didn't "get" what Jesus was all about. It was, to them, "mysterious."

Winston Churchill is credited with describing the country of Russia as "*a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma*" - meaning that Russia is very difficult to understand. It's a mystery.

Jesus' Gospel is also a mystery, but it isn't that kind of a mystery. It isn't that the Gospel is so hard to understand. It's that it was not understandable at all - until it was revealed by God.

But now, the mystery of the Gospel has been revealed. The message that faith in Jesus is sufficient to save is the message that unlocks the door to God's richest blessings.

A Powerful Message with Unparalleled Promise (v. 9)

[9] but just as it is written:⁷ "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HUMAN HEART, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."

⁶ "***Lord of glory***" - loftiest title ever given to Jesus! (So, Leon Morris)

⁷ We are not sure from what source Paul took this quotation. It may be a loose translation of an Old Testament text, or perhaps from some other Jewish writing.

Believe it or not, that verse isn't talking about heaven. It's a description of the plans God has for the believer on earth.⁸

It means that those who believe in Jesus - and then go on to lead a life of **"LOVING HIM"** - will experience abundance beyond their wildest imaginings, right here and right now. (See John 10:10)

The idea is that there is always something more in store for us from God than we would have ever dreamed possible. There is always the possibility of more joy, more love, more impact, more purpose, more meaning.

No matter what your experience of Christ is NOW, there is always something MORE for those believers who **"LOVE HIM."**

Receiving eternal life by faith in Jesus and enjoying abundant life as we love and follow Jesus don't do away with life's problems and don't erase hardship.

In fact, some problems and hardships may come because we love and follow Jesus. And yet, the richness that accompanies those hardships are completely worth it.

Given that, why doesn't everyone - especially everyone in the church! - get in line, love and follow Jesus, be "all in" for Jesus?

In what follows, Paul gives two reasons why people don't enter into the richness of life with Jesus, two reasons why people don't embrace the idea that ETERNAL and ABUNDANT LIFE is found only in Jesus.

Before we get to those two reasons, though, he speaks of what I'll call the *normal* Christian life. This may not be the average Christian life, but it is God's *norm*.

The Message's Reception...by Categories (2:6--3:4)

The Mature, Spiritual Person and the Message (2:6, 10-13)

⁸ Paul loosely quotes Isaiah 64:4, a text that draws attention to the unexpected, outrageous grace God bestows on those who love Him.

A message for the mature (v. 6a)

[6a] Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature...

By "maturity" Paul isn't thinking about being a certain age or having been a Christian for "x" number of years. Maturity is about being spiritually minded.

Mature Christians "get" the glory of life in Jesus. And the reason they get it is that they intentionally take to heart the truth of what God has revealed.

A message for the spiritual (vv. 10-13)

Walking in the light of God's revelation (vv. 10-12)

[10] For to us God revealed them⁹ through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. [11] For who among people knows the thoughts of a person except the spirit of the person that is in him? So also the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.¹⁰ [12] Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God.¹¹

God, through the witness of a friend, by someone reading the Bible, or by some other means, brings the saving message of Jesus to someone who doesn't know Jesus.

⁹ **"God revealed them"** means that all potential for boasting is gone.

¹⁰ Nobody knows what you are thinking, except you. The most skilled counselor on earth can't really KNOW unless you tell him or her what you are thinking. As with man, so with God. The Spirit plumbs the depths of the mind of God and is the Agent of revelation to the Christian. Interesting, too, to whom the Holy Spirit chose to reveal His secrets of God. Not to the learned philosophers, but to the **"not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble"** (1:26) Christians.

¹¹ Whoever believes in Jesus receives the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion, and (as Paul says here) the Holy Spirit reveals the things of God to the human heart.

By that message, God pulls back the veil that the enemy has put over someone's heart. (2 Corinthians 4:4)¹²

Then, with unveiled heart, that person who has heard the message believes that Jesus was telling the truth when He said that He would give eternal life to the one who believed in Him for eternal life.

And, at the instant of believing, that person becomes a Christian.

When you believed in Jesus, it was because you understood that you could never measure up before God. You knew that it is what Christ has done for you that makes all the difference.

So you took Him at His word. You believed.

When you believed, God's Spirit revealed to you that just like you could only find ETERNAL LIFE in Jesus, so you could only find ABUNDANT LIFE and purpose and meaning and peace and joy in Jesus.

Living in alignment with this is what spiritual maturity is all about. Or, we could say, that's what maturing in Jesus is all about.

A Christian who lives in light of this revelation over the course of months and years will become a powerfully loving person. And (current topic) he or she will become a force for unity in Jesus' church.

This "**mature**" believer (or "**the one who is spiritual**" - v. 14) is the Christian who follows the path that leads to unity.¹³

[13] We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

¹² It is often the case, too, that the heart of the person who hears the Gospel is already open to the message, as Lydia was who had gone to the riverside in Philippi for worship. God opened her "open" heart to see the truth and the beauty of the message Paul, Silas, and Timothy brought about Jesus. (Acts 16:14)

¹³ He remembers what makes us "one" in Jesus - the cross; our baptism; the message; our chronic neediness.

But not everybody gets the idea that LIFE is to be found only in Jesus. So, here is where Paul gives two reasons why someone would not embrace that idea.

The Natural Person...and the Message (2:14-16)

"Natural" people can't grasp spiritual truth (v. 14)

[14] But a natural¹⁴ person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God...

In classical Greek thought, the "**natural person**" was someone under the control of his reason. It was a very good thing, mankind at his highest was the "**natural person**."

But for Paul to refer to "**a natural person**" was different.

He wouldn't say that the "**natural person**" was a notorious sinner or a criminal.

The "**natural**" man or woman may be brilliant, moral, philanthropic, athletic, and kind. But...he or she isn't born again.

The boundary of the "**natural person's**" world view is the world.

So, **[14] the things of the Spirit of God...are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.**

As helpful as nature can be, nature doesn't allow someone to grasp the Spirit's revelations.¹⁵

The wisdom taught by the Spirit follows the path of the cross.

¹⁴ This is the only time in Paul's writings he refers to a man by the term "**natural**." Yet, it is clear what he means. He means a person who does not have eternal life.

¹⁵ By analogy, the "**natural person**" can no more understand the Spirit's truths than someone who is tone-deaf can judge music.

To the natural mind, the idea that God worked through the tragedy of the cross, and that God intended for Jesus to die on the cross and that now there is salvation and LIFE in no one else but Jesus, is absurd.

The reason that the natural person doesn't understand the message is that he can't understand it.¹⁶

But, again, by way of contrast, the person who has the indwelling Holy Spirit CAN understand God's truth.

Spiritual people have the mind of Christ (vv. 15-16)

[15] But the one who is spiritual discerns all things, yet he himself is discerned by no one. [16] For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

By saying that ***"the one who is spiritual"*** has ***"the mind of Christ,"***¹⁷ Paul doesn't mean that the Christian can know all the thoughts of the Second Person of the Trinity.

He means that we can learn from the Spirit who dwells within us as He reveals Christ to us. He does through Scripture, by teaching from other Christians, and by His own promptings and guidings.

Believers in Jesus can accept and assimilate and apply the Spirit's revelations about how life in Christ works.

¹⁶ In light of 1 Corinthians 2:14, it is clear that God must do something for the ***"natural person"*** to receive the things of God's Spirit. Some think that God gives faith, as a gift. But the Bible passages that are used to make this point, don't actually make this point. More to the point, Satan veils people's minds to keep them from understanding the Gospel. When a Christian shares the Gospel with an unbeliever, God removes the veil to free them to understand so that they are then able and free to believe. (See Acts 16:14 and 2 Corinthians 4:4.)

¹⁷ When Paul writes, ***"WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM"*** he was quoting Isaiah 40:13, a verse about knowing the mind of YHWH. Paul equates YHWH here, with Jesus, a clear affirmation of the deity of Jesus.

Believers can learn to embrace the promise of the abundant life, which is that abundance is found in Jesus and nowhere else.

So, NOT believing in Jesus (as is the case with the ***"natural person"***) is one reason someone will not receive spiritual truth.

But there is another reason. This is what Paul is most concerned about for the church at Corinth - and for us.

The Immature (fleshly) Person...and the Message (3:1-4)

A too-long spiritual infancy = fleshliness / carnality (vv. 1-3a)

[1] And I, brothers and sisters, could not speak to you as spiritual people, but only as fleshly, as to infants in Christ. [2] I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to consume it.¹⁸ But even now you are not yet able, [3a] for you are still fleshly.

So far today, Paul has identified two categories of people. We have met the ***"mature / spiritual Christian"*** and we have met the ***"natural person."***

Now we meet a third category, which is actually a second category of Christian. He introduces us to the ***"fleshly"*** believer, or the believer who has over-stayed his welcome in spiritual infancy.

Now, a word about babies. Babies are great. I love babies and I'll bet you do, too. Babies are cute and cuddly and adorable.

But they're very immature. And we don't begrudge babies their immaturity.

So, when they do what babies do - like cry and throw tantrums - we aren't put off. We get it. They're babies.

¹⁸ Check out Hebrews 5:11-14, for a parallel passage.

However, when a grown-up or a teenager throws a tantrum, that's different. Infantile behavior from someone who should have outgrown that behavior is a problem.

And that's the person Paul has in mind here.

Paul was remembering the eighteen months he spent in Corinth, evangelizing, discipling, and teaching there. He remembered how the Corinthians had been on fire for Jesus when they came to faith.

But for the time that he was there, they were spiritual infants, still figuring things out, still learning new ways to think, talk, and act.

That was then, and that was OK. But this is now, and from all reports, they're still acting like babies. And that isn't OK.

I know that it is impossible to put a strict time frame on these things, but I am going to make a "time" comment.

I think that it's telling that Paul had been gone from Corinth for three and a half years when he wrote First Corinthians.¹⁹

While he had been with them, they grew as Christian infants. And they weren't wrong to have been acting like babies or toddlers during that time. They were very young in the faith.

Now, though, three or four years later, he called them on the carpet for acting like babies.

They had passed the cute and cuddly stage. They should have been "**mature**" and "**spiritual**" by now, but they weren't.

Paul called these Christians who were stuck in an over-long infancy, "**fleshly**." That's a bad thing.

The Christian who by now should "get" that LIFE is all about Jesus and isn't getting it (THAT message is what the Spirit teaches the believer!) is "**fleshly**."

¹⁹ We believe that Paul left Corinth in the Fall of AD 52 and that 1 Corinthians was written in the Spring of AD 56.

Rather than listen to the Spirit's revelation of the glory of life in Christ, the "**fleshly**" (carnal) Christian "**quenches**" the Spirit's fire (1 Thessalonians 5:19) and "**grieves the Spirit**." (Ephesians 4:30)

Now the reason Paul brings up this matter of *spiritual maturity* vs *being stuck in spiritual infancy* here, is that immaturity is most vividly expressed by self-centeredness.

Babies are quite self-centered. So are spiritual babies. And Christian self-centeredness explains discord and lack of unity in the church.

Walking like "ordinary [natural] people" (vv. 3-4)

[3b] For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like ordinary people? [4] For when one says, "I am with Paul," and another, "I am with Apollos," are you not ordinary people?

Both strife and jealousy are relational. I can't be jealous and I can't have strife by myself. I need you in order to do that.

I get jealous when I want to have what you have. Synonyms are "envy" and "greed." To be jealous is very baby-ish and fleshly.

Strife is just as relational - and just as sinful. Strife shows up when I don't get my way. Again, baby-ish and fleshly.

To expand our thinking here, when I become porcupine with you because you have a different idea about how to do something than I do, when I take offense at your constructive criticism, or when I in any way violate love, I am being baby-ish. Fleshly.

Even worse, I'm living like "an ordinary person," that is, like a "**natural person**" walks. I am a Christian but I am living as if I was not a Christian.

Christians are to be those who work through issues and don't dodge them. We are to lovingly work toward resolution in the pursuit of a common goal. We are to recognize diversity in the church and thank God for it.

Because of the grace we have received AND because of the Spirit's presence in our lives, we are to be and we can be extraordinarily loving people.

Conclusion:

Two major takeaways surface from Paul's challenging words.

First, you know people who have yet to come to know Jesus. We all do. In no sense, do we look down on someone who is far from God. That's our story, and we want the people we know to know our Jesus.

So, pray for that person you have in your mind right now. Lift them up to God and ask for an open door to open your mouth to tell them the best news they'll ever hear. Ask God to remove the veil that is keeping them from seeing the truth, and that with the veil ripped away, they will see and believe.

Second, and more personally, let's all get reflective for a moment. King David asked God to ***"search"*** him (Psalm 139), so let's each of us ask ourselves, *"Have I gotten myself 'stuck' in an overlong spiritual infancy?"* If so, confess that to God and make an About Face away from half-hearted, fleshly Christianity.

Just like I had to turn around on a mountain trail when I was going in the wrong direction, today God calls you to make progress by backtracking. Lean into the reality that just as eternal life is only found in Jesus, so abundant life is only found in Jesus.

Walk toward Jesus and grow into the powerfully loving man or woman Jesus saved you to become.