

1 Corinthians 3

The Gospel and Christian Leadership
March 19, 2017 - Spence Shelton

Intro

Hey guys turn in your bibles to 1 Corinthians 3.

If we were to have our services outside at a cemetery today. And I were to go and preach TO the graves....and I were to tell the dead people to rise up. What would make them rise? What if I tried volume? I could blame the acoustics since we are outside and maybe get a megaphone or portable speaker system. OR maybe I could try humor: “hey hear the one about the guy who died drinking varnish?” He had a rough life but a great finish! Or maybe I need to be more relevant to them: How you can enjoy your best afterlife now.¹ Ok...if at some point one of those people actually got up out of the grave and started to do what I told them to do in my sermon...nobody would say “wow! Spence that joke, that outline, that fresh haircut...it made dead people come alive.” NO – you’d say that was a miracle! Power of God!” To suggest dead people rising from the grave had anything to do with my communication ability is simply idiotic.

¹ Illustration idea from Erwin Lutzer’s address at the **NCBSC Evangelism Conference in 2006.**

The apostle Paul says this throughout his letters. He says everyone is dead in their sin (That’s Ephesians 2) and then GOD gave raised them up. Gave them new life. For us to follow Christ it first takes the miracle of God’s power raising us from spiritual death.²

In today’s passage Paul, our author, is going to talk about 2 problems the Corinthians had when relating to their leaders: Surface level & Deeper one. Paul is going to diagnose their surface level problem in a way that reveals their deeper problem. It’s gonna be cool.

Surface level: They were putting a great deal of stock in their leadership and the result was conflict in the church. And Paul says this is a real problem. So That’s where we are going today. You are going to see how the gospel gives you a right understanding of church leadership. We dipped our toe in the water on that last week and we hit it full force today. Here’s why this matters to you:

- Some of you are in ministry or plan on it and you need to know how to look at yourself. On top of that, All of us, in some way or another, are in leadership as we try to share the gospel and lead others towards Christ

² The structure for my intro is modeled after J.D. Greear’s intro on this same passage he preached in the *Authentic Christianity* series. Sermon title: “Christian Leadership Unmasked.”

- Anyone who is a member of the church needs to know how to relate to church leadership.
- I've heard many times about someone being disappointed by a Christian leader and their faith is destroyed. You have too. We need this passage to help us deal with that disappointment.

So let's get into this passage and see how he addresses this issue³:

[1] But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. [2] I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.

There was a time, where The Corinthians were spiritual infants. So, like infants, he had to feed them with milk (simple basic core truth of Christianity). This is a phase every believer goes through. Where the truths of the gospel are so amazing to you and following Jesus is so new to you. And following Jesus is new so your heart is in it but you are still figuring out what it means for how you live.

³ I have been heavily influenced by D.A. Carson's "The Cross & Christian Ministry" and J.D. Greear's sermon "Christian Leadership Unmasked" in the preparation for this message. Most good ideas in here are likely theirs and I will attribute as such. But the influence of both on shaping thoughts I may even think are my own cannot go unstated.

I read a book last year about a drug dealer who came to faith and he said the idea of tithing was awesome to him. The offering plate came around and he dropped big rubber banded rolls of cash into it. He said after just 3 months of him being there the pastor announced a new building fund because the offering for the whole church had tripled. And he was like, "I thought, I could double my drug sales and pay for this thing!" Right heart...but building a larger church facility through increased drug trafficking in your community isn't exactly honoring to Jesus. And over time this drug dealer came under conviction from God's spirit that his job harmed others while the gospel calls him to love others.⁴ God's spirit changed him and his life became more in line with Christ as a result of his heart changing.

Paul is saying if you come to Christ your heart changes immediately. You get new goggles to see the world through. and then in time your life begins to re-align around that new heart & new vision. There is nothing wrong with infancy in Christ! There is actually something good about a drug dealer who comes to faith tithing off his drug money...for a season. Cause God is after your heart. Eventually if your heart is captured by Christ, your life will change.

Paul is saying there is nothing wrong with spiritual infancy for a season. And that's where his problem comes in:

⁴ This story is from "Street God" by Dimas Salaberios.

And even now you are not yet ready, [3] for you are **still** of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving **only in a human way**? [4] For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being **merely human**?

Still!? It's been 5 years guys. you are still acting like babies!? Now Paul is holding them accountable and he says they've messed up. Paul sees a contradiction growing in the Corinthian church: They are 5 year old Christians, acting like infants. That's a problem.

When Zeke was a baby – Ate all the time. And would always GRAB for my food. We withheld chocolate from him his whole first year of life. But then when he turned 1...his digestive system had matured enough so he could handle it. So...we gave him a GIANT cupcake. And he loved it! And now at 8 years old the kid eats more than I do at a meal. Because his body has matured into a bottomless pit. He's not even a teenager yet! But Paul is saying...you Corinthians...you are *still* like babies. Which is not healthy. You are like the 8 year old I read about the other day whose mother still nurses him. Ummm...8. Too old for all milk diet. Need some meat. These Corinthians are 5 year olds on an all milk diet. It ain't good.

Surface Problem: The conflict over their allegiance to their leaders. REVEALS their deeper problem: that they are being "merely human." Which is an awesome phrase. Merely human. The reason he says that is because as Christians...they are people who have the Spirit of God with

them. That's what Chapter 2 was all about. They should live and act differently than mere humans because they carry around God's Spirit with them! And God's spirit transforms you into a different person and then flows out from you to bring change to others! **The deeper problem is they are missing the transforming power of God in their lives!!**

But this argument about leadership reveals that they have missed where the power of God comes from.

[5] What then is Apollos? What is Paul? **Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.**

That's all your leaders are. Just servants. And notice that last phrase. Paul is going to keep going back to it. God assigned to each. And then Paul, being a good preacher, he uses two analogies to correct their view of Christian Leadership.

[6] I planted, Apollos watered, **but God gave the growth.** [7] So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, **but only God who gives the growth.** [8] He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. [9] For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field,

Kicks off with farming. I love gardening for food so this one makes sense to me. Notice the characters. The Church is the field. The Pastors are the servants who tend to the field.

And God is both the owner of the field and the life source who gives the growth.

Verse 7 is crucial – the servants are NOTHING. Only the one who gives the growth is “something.” Like I said...I can preach to dead people all day. But Jonah 2.9 is crystal clear – salvation belongs to the LORD and no one else. Christian Leaders are only servants of Christ. “No Christian leader is to be venerated or listened to with the kind of allegiance and devotion properly reserved for God alone.” – D.A. Carson⁵

To lift up a man to such a status is to misunderstand how God works. You are God’s field. God’s word is like the seed that goes into your heart and then God’s spirit gives the growth! I, as your pastor, just hoe and water. The seed, the water, the growth...that is ALL the property and power of God.

And these Christians were giving such allegiance to Paul & Apollos that they were missing God. And that is dangerous for the church and for it’s leaders! I don’t want to be in God’s spot and I don’t want you putting me there. We have a word for that right: “Idolizing.”

I used to do that with Michael Jordan. Whatever he ate, wore, drank...I wanted it. He could do no wrong. Then...he

⁵ Carson, D.A. *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (Baker Books Grand Rapids, MI 1993) 77.

played baseball. And my idol fell. Tragic to see him being so human.

I’m not saying its bad to have heroes in the faith ok. But its easy to lionize them to the point you think they are perfect. And that’s bad for everyone. Leaders Ego & Your false hope.

Paul is saying it is childish when you think your growth is because of the leader and not the God the leader is pointing you to!

The power to raise people from the dead... the power of Life is from God!

- Genesis 1 – God speaks. And his words create life on the world. Ever thought about that? God just spoke and landscapes were formed, the stars were hung in the sky, and creatures crawled along the ground.
- Genesis 2...God breathed life into man. His breath is life giving.
- Jesus comes on the scene as the WORD of GOD made flesh and he says to a dead Lazarus “Come out of your grave” and Lazarus walks out! He heals the sick. Gives sight to the blind, makes the deaf hear. All with just a word or a touch. He radiates LIFE.
- Then like we said last week, the bible is the very word of God. So now his word radiates life.

That’s why we preach the bible every week! You may ask why then do I use things like humor and philosophy in my sermons...It’s just watering and hoeing. Preaching is just connecting you, as faithfully as I can, to God’s words. There is no power in my words. That’s why we spend so much

time just looking at the bible. The power is in God's words and my job is to try to connect you as clearly to it as I can.

Paul's point: **Do not give to a leader the type of allegiance & veneration that is only reserved for God.** When you start to exalt leaders to such a status that they can do no wrong, that's a problem. Billy Graham, John Piper...these guys are great but they didn't die for your sins. Jesus did. So you don't need me or any other preacher to be perfect because Jesus already is. Don't put leaders in a seat that only belongs to God. I love the legacy Billy Graham has here in CLT with the Library and everything but he never once saved someone. And he'd be first to tell you

Now, I'm NOT SAYING leaders shouldn't be given respect and honor.

[17] Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. 1 Timothy 5:17

There is a weight to my job and to the rest of our elders. We carry the responsibility for the spiritual health of Mercy Church and it is important in our church that you understand that. Sometimes in an attempt to follow Paul's warning in our passage today we can go to the other extreme and forget the weight of the responsibility of a pastor. The only way we as a church can respect and honor our leaders in a healthy way is if we make a such a big deal about Jesus there is no way they can be in competition.

Ok let's keep going because the second analogy comes with a real sober warning to leaders:

[9] You are...God's building [10] According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.

That's just saying it took years, sometimes generations, to build these structures. So sometimes one builder would get started and another would pick up where he left off.

[11] For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. [12] Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—[13] each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. [14] If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. [15] If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Ok let's be clear again on the roles. The church...YOU ALL...are God's building. The builders...those are Christian leaders. And he's talking about how a leader builds the church. The foundation is Jesus Christ...It's the gospel message. That's what the church is founded on right? 1 Corinthians 2.2 – I desired to know NOTHING among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul is warning them against leaders who build the church on anything inconsistent with the foundation. The foundation of the gospel can be described as precious metals that will be able to withstand the heat of fire. That's Paul's way of saying God is going to hold leaders accountable for the way they built his Church.

If leaders take the confession of the gospel – That Christ died to save us from our sin – and he resurrected giving us new life in him - that's our foundation. Then you start to build on some shoddy materials – like your charming personality, flashy shows, lots of money, intelligence, number of twitter followers, or anything else – God will hold you accountable. Paul is saying every leader MUST build with the same material that the foundation was built with: The GOSPEL! It might be EASIER and QUICKER to build with poor materials but time will reveal the builder's work. You must build the church WITH THE GOSPEL!

Harvard – Began as a seminary. Their seal

Ok Church what does this mean?

- You in ministry – God will hold you accountable. He will. He is not impressed with how much education you receive or where you receive it from. He is not impressed with how good of a communicator you are. There is nothing wrong with education or talent, but they are bad materials to try to build the church on. The ONLY thing that can be at the center of the

church has to be the foolish despised Cross of Christ. Nothing else!

○ Illustration: Pastor as Best Man in a wedding.

- Church – Here's what scares me: We might be able to build a big church on great personalities, state of the art buildings (you know, one day), great music, and the most inviting atmosphere on planet earth. Straight up, ya'll are fun people. I'd want to be a part of this group if I wasn't. I could give self-help strategies and we could keep things light and focused on helping people feel better about themselves. On giving them great uplifting experiences each weekend....BUT That's not what God's church is! We are here to make disciples of Jesus Christ who love God and worship him with their entire lives! Nothing but the resurrecting power of the gospel can do that ya'll.
- There is a reason bible belt Christians hop from church to church every 2 to 4 years without the gospel ever changing their lives. Many are looking for a good preacher to listen to instead of a savior to surrender to. They don't want life change they want their minds stimulated and as a church we could grow a church by bending to that desire. But our job is to put Jesus front and center every week. Will we use intellect? Sure. But only to plow a trough to the Cross of Jesus.
- Herbert Spencer –Prominent British Sociologist 1800s. Some said was the single most influential

European intellectual in the latter part of the 19th century. He was also an infamous agnostic. He went to hear Spurgeon one weekend at the behest of a friend. Later His friend asked him what he thought. He was kind of in a daydream and he said “about whom?” His friend said “about Spurgeon of course.” And Spencer replied “Oh Spurgeon, I haven’t been thinking about him. I’ve been thinking about Spurgeon’s Jesus.”

- May that be us Mercy Church. A core value in how we plan our weekends is undistracting excellence. May we do things with excellence so that you can see Jesus more clearly than you did before.

He ups the stakes even further:

[16] Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? [17] If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Another warning that this building is no mere building. The church is holy. It is God’s temple. And if a leader destroys God’s temple by building it on shoddy work, it will be revealed and God will hold him accountable.

So based on all of that he says:

[18] Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. [19] For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” [20] and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.” [21] So let no one boast in men

- The command is don’t deceive yourself...in fact...become a fool so that you can actually become wise. You catch that church? This is humbling for me because I want to become as smart and as well read and as articulate as possible in order to defend the gospel. Paul’s not saying that’s bad. But he’s saying don’t look to that for the power to change people. True wisdom is in the gospel; which is foolishness to the world. So give yourself to foolishness!

If we are in a graveyard...if your campus, your workplace, your neighborhood...if they are graveyards then we need to realize seeing lives changed by God will have nothing to do with us. We must throw ourselves onto the power of God.

(13) Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus - Acts 4.13

Know what that means? It means these guys were country preachers that nobody respected BUT WHEN THEY

SPOKE...man it was powerful! And it was evident they had been with Jesus. I want that to be us. All of us.

- Listen this has huge implications for us in our city. It means we should get before God desperately for the salvation of those in our circles. You can say “man they weren’t interested when I tried to share with them.” I expect that from dead people. But that should create an increased desperation and urgency in our prayer lives. If its only God that can save those we know and love then why aren’t we on our knees constantly for them!
- Give yourself to prayer! Easter is coming. Last Week: Stay here for easter. Let’s get desperate for God to MOVE this Easter. I told you the way to think of who to invite: Someone far from God but close to you. That person...SPENCE is not going to save them. Neither are you. THE POWER OF GOD will. So go talk to GOD about them! Pray together in community groups for them! Come pray for God to MOVE!
- GOOD FRIDAY: DAY OF PRAYER & FASTING. WE WILL WORSHIP TOGETHER THAT NIGHT. CALL ON GOD TO MOVE.
- Community Groups – I talk about this often in training but if you spend more time sharing prayer requests than actually praying...what does this say about what you believe about God? Let’s work to invite and share but then pray like it’s all up to God. Because it is!

- This week Courtney was reaching our kids about the building of Solomon’s temple from 2 Chronicles 7. God teaches Solomon how he will help Israel. He says [14] if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. 2 Chronicles 7:14
- This pattern of his people praying and then God moving is just the pattern of scripture! So lets pray for God to move!

Now when you get what Paul is saying...he finishes with this little summary that holds some rich promises for you.

For all things are yours, [22] whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, [23] and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

He says when you start to look at your leaders through the gospel, everything else (including them) starts to be put in the place God intended it. And the things that once gave you anxiety and fear and doubt can become things that bring you closer to God himself. Think about it:

- Church leaders – If you are a church leader, your identity is no longer built around numbers of people in your church but on your security in Christ. If you are not a leader, you can serve your leaders better

because you haven't put them in such a high place that there is no room for sin or disappointment in their lives.

- The world: This world which used to demand so much of your time...which calls you to chase security through relationships or career success..that you can sometimes feel like you are enslaved to it...its now a looking glass through which you can experience the joy in christ you will have in full in eternity.
- Life: The world tells you life is all there is so you are either dominated by fear of losing life or careless because life seems meaningless. God says life is but a vapor that vanishes quickly so you can't hang on to it even if you try, but there is eternity to follow so what happens here matters a great deal. So we can now give our lives freely (because we don't cling to it) BUT for a purpose: for those who don't know the gospel because we want them to have the security in Christ that we have
- Death: The world tells you death is the end and is to be feared. So get what you can while you can. The Gospel tells you Jesus faced death so that it is only a shadow that you pass through. There is no sting in it. We face death not in fear but in worship of the one who defeated it on our behalf.
- Present: The world tells us to stay busy because busy-ness equates to value. And the busier I am the more I must matter. The Gospel says I can rest. I can be free of the tyranny of the urgent because my

identity is in Christ whose love for me isn't based off my performance today

- Future: Oh anxiety dominates this doesn't it? What will happen to me, my family, my career, my friends, my relationships...you name it. We fear the future so we try to control it. But we cant. The Gospel says when it comes to the one thing that matters most, the future is certain.

- [38] For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8.38-39

When you understand the gospel you see your world a different way. The things that once controlled your heart and brought you anxiety are now opportunities for you to celebrate the freedom you have in Christ!

See their surface level problem was giving allegiance to leaders that belonged to Christ. But the deeper problem was that the eyes of their hearts were not fixed on Christ to begin with.

Where are your eyes fixed? Is it a particular pastor or mentor who can do no wrong in your eyes? Maybe its not a leader, maybe your focus is just on something that is taking your attention away from Christ. Whatever that is, it is not

designed to carry the weight of your soul. No person, no created thing was ever built to handle the weight of your worship. Only Christ can handle that.