

Partisanship in the Church

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1 Corinthians 3:1-4 (NKJV) “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?”

The citizens of the United States are often divided along political parties. These party differences prevent our leaders from working together to tackle serious problems in our country. During the 2008 Presidential Election season, the Republican motto was “Country First”. Through this motto they tried to convey the idea that Americans must move beyond partisan politics and join together as one people in order to face the challenges ahead.

Unfortunately, the church is often not much better off than the nation when it comes to partisanship. Paul addressed the problem behind the partisanship that had crept into the church at Corinth. The problem was carnality. Paul could not address these believers as spiritual because they were not being controlled by the Spirit of God but by their flesh.

Carnal believers operate in worldly wisdom rather than in the wisdom of God. As a result, they manifest the wrong kind of behavior. James 3:14-16 (NKJV) says, *“But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.”*

Paul likens these “carnal” believers to “babes in Christ”. They were behaving like immature spiritual babies rather than like mature Spirit-controlled Christians. No matter what they claimed, their fleshly attitudes, motives, and deeds revealed their true condition.

Granted, every born again believer begins as a newborn baby in Christ. However, the believers at Corinth had no excuse for their immaturity. Paul had fed them with milk for a long time. “Milk” refers to the “first principles of the oracles of God”—the essential and fundamental truths of the faith that are easily digested by new believers (Hebrews 5:12). Peter calls these principles the “pure milk of the word” (1 Peter 2:2). Those who can only digest milk are still immature—“unskilled in the word of righteousness” (Hebrews 5:13).

The reason Paul could not feed these believers with solid food is because they were not yet able to stomach the truth that would produce spiritual maturity in their lives. Hebrews 5:14 states that solid food belongs to those who are of “full age”—those who through practicing the word of God on a daily basis had their senses trained to discern both good and evil.

Paul states that with the amount of time and teaching that the Corinthian believers had received since they first believed, they should be mature believers by now. But they weren’t. Hebrews 5:12-13 (NKJV) states it this way: *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.”*

What is spiritual maturity? Is it how long a person has been a Christian or how long they have been in the church? No, this is not the measure of spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is not a matter of age but development. It is not a matter of knowledge but of character. It is not a

matter of knowing but of doing. The carnal partisanship in the church defied their claim to spiritual maturity.

What does it mean to be “carnal”? Romans 8:5-8 (NKJV) says, “*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*” First, carnality is living according to the flesh (“in the flesh”). Those who operate “in the flesh” cannot please God.

Second, carnality is a mindset. Carnal people have given themselves over to a fleshly mentality. Their thoughts are destructive rather than Christ-like. They think like the world who does not know Christ. A mind set on the flesh undermines and destroys the life and unity of the church.

Third, carnality is hostility toward God. A carnal person is insubordinate to the law of God. While they outwardly profess to love God, they inwardly resent and reject His Lordship in their lives.

In 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 Paul identifies three evidences of the partisan carnality found in the church at Corinth. The first evidence was “envy” which refers to an envious and contentious rivalry or jealousy. When we are envious of others we become angry with any advantage they may have causing us to fight against them whether openly or covertly. The second evidence was “strife” which refers to contention or angry disputing. The third evidence was “division” which refers to sedition (insurrection against God-ordained authority), dissension (partisan and contentious arguing), and division (disunity, separating the parts).

Unfortunately immature and carnal people don’t see that they are immature and carnal. Their immaturity and carnality blinds them to their true condition. Therefore Paul exhorts believers to “examine” yourselves. We must look at our behavior and ask, “Am I carnal—behaving like a spiritual baby who is controlled by my flesh rather than by the Spirit of God?” We must not fall into the trap of evaluating our maturity level by our intentions or profession but rather by our attitudes, words, and deeds.

Carnal behavior in the lives of believers had produced the evil of partisanship in the Corinthian church. What is partisanship? It is “a firm adherence to a party, faction, cause, or person *esp*: one exhibiting blind, prejudiced, and unreasoning allegiance” (Webster’s Dictionary). Partisanship develops through the aforementioned motivations of envy, strife, and division. Partisanship brings disunity within the church through a determination by one or more groups to control the direction, life, and ministry of the church. Partisanship is usually driven by *personality* and *preference*. We must not allow the church to be divided around *personalities*. The Corinthian church had splintered into opposing groups based on their favorite teachers—all who were servants of Jesus Christ! Neither should we allow *preferences* to divide the church. For instance, some may prefer hymns over worship choruses or vice a versa, but we should never allow this to destroy the church. Why? It is a matter of preference. On the other hand, God’s truth regarding the faith and salvation is not a preference but a matter for which we should be willingly to suffer and die.

When we divide over personality and preference rather than over issues of the faith and salvation, we are being carnal and immature causing unnecessary and harmful disunity and partisanship in the church. Paul insists, “Christ is not divided!” (1 Corinthians 1:13) Jesus Christ has but one church. (Ephesians 4:1-6).

We must remind ourselves that we are new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Like a person with amnesia, we often forget who we are in Christ and lose our sense of spiritual identity. As a result, we revert back to our old carnal nature. Let’s not remain immature carnal babies but rather move on to spiritual maturity. Let’s not live in the basement of our fleshly

nature by splintering into partisan groups, but let's grow up in spiritual maturity to live as one unified loving church under Christ.