

THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN GROWTH

I Corinthians 3:1-11

In chapters two and three of First Corinthians Paul divides men into three groups: The "natural," the "spiritual," and the "carnal." Each of these groups deserves our serious study. They are mirror-men in whom we may discover in which group we are.

1. The Natural Man.

The "natural" man is an expression which includes in its scope all who, however estimable they may be in all other respects, are unregenerate. The "natural" man may be civilized and cultured. He may be educated and improved. But he lacks a taste for the things of God. He neither receives nor has the ability to understand spiritual truth. He has only the natural power of the unregenerated mind.

The "natural" man lives the one-dimensional life of self and sense. His own emotions, desires, instincts, and appetites govern him. He lives on the plane where people frankly want their own way and, as far as they can, they get it. The man who is living on this level lacks the capacity to understand and appreciate spiritual values. To him they are folly. Consequently, he is indifferent to them, or spurns them, or perhaps even scoffs at them. When you talk to him about the wondrous truths of God's Word, he will look at you in amazement and will say, "I do not see the important of these things."

2. The Spiritual Man.

The "spiritual" man is one who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. He possesses both physical and spiritual life. He is no longer dominated by self, but is guided by the Holy Spirit. He is able to see the difference between what is of God and what is of man. He has the ability to appreciate spiritual truths. He enjoys spiritual things.

3. The Carnal Man.

The "carnal" man is a Christian who is dominated by the fleshly part of his nature. He is a Christian in whom the life of faith is mixed with survivals of the old selfishness. He is a saved man, but behaving to a great extent like one who is not.

Paul addressed the Corinthians as "brethren" and then referred to them as "babies." The advent of a baby brings great joy to a family. All of us love babies, but none of us wants them to remain such. All the joy of babyhood passes when there is no growth. One of the great delights of parents is to watch the development and growth of their little ones.

The Corinthians were Christians, but they had not made any progress toward spiritual maturity. They were in a condition of arrested development. They were in a state of spiritual infancy. They were not strong enough for the solid food that Paul was prepared to give. Instead of being able to consume solid food, they were weak, milk-drinking infants. They were still unable to be fed with meat. They were still just big babies. It is much the same in the churches today, many cannot take the meat of the Word.

When Paul focused his camera on these carnal Christians he caught them fussing and quarreling over their leaders in the church. Instead of being united around their Lord, they were divided over their leaders. Instead of unity in Christ, it was division into factions, and that sort of thing always creates a public scandal.

The membership of the church at Corinth was divided over preachers. One faction was composed of those who thought Paul was the greatest preacher in the world. Another group thought Apollos was the greatest preacher of all. To show all of them the fallacy of their position Paul told them that he was just a planter and Apollos was merely a waterer. So actually neither of them was anything, but God was everything. Therefore, said he, "What's the use of your fighting over which one of two nothings is the greater?" Paul said that he and Apollos were "ministers." By that he meant that they were running errands for the Lord. They were servants of God, under divine authority, going where He sent them, and doing what the Lord told them. As the Lord's ministers, it was their task to do God's will, to speak His mind, and to declare His message.

Concerning Christians Paul remarked, "We are God's fellow workers." What a tremendous declaration! What a title! That is the highest tribute that can be paid to Christians. What a distinction it confers upon us! We are laboring together in the work which God has committed into our hands, and we are to do it at the same time and for the same purpose, namely, the glory of God and the welfare of others.

Paul likened Christians to a building, saying, "Ye are God's building." That word may have two meanings-- God's structure in the sense of His erecting it, and God's possessions because that which He creates and builds belongs to Him. He is the builder, and He owns that which He builds.

The foundation of a building is exceedingly important. A foundation is the base or the undermost part of a building, wall or structure. It may be clay, sand, rock, brick, or concrete. Likewise the foundation of a life may be shoddy or solid. It may be based on facts, or it may rest solely upon fancies. There are those who build their lives on crumbling foundations. Christ warned against that sort of things.

In erecting any building great care should be exercised in laying a good foundation, for if that be defective the superstructure will be a piece of folly, regardless of how beautiful it may be. Any wise builder will be careful about his foundation because it will determine the strength of his superstructure. The foundation and the superstructure must be in keeping with each other. One must never build a skyscraper on a bungalow foundation.

Thank God, we do not have to lay the foundation. It is already laid for us through the love of God and by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We face the unalterable fact that Christ is the one and only foundation. It is simply gratuitous impudence for another to assume the role of foundation for "Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Paul even scouts the suggestion that one will even dare to lay beside Christ another foundation for religion. The foundation is Christ Himself; the historical Christ of Bethlehem, of Nazareth, of Calvary, of the open tomb, of Olivet.

In the sands of all time Christ has left His footprints; in the halls of all Christian and beneficent institutions are the crimson tints of His limitless sacrifices and golden deeds; in the corridors of all generations are heard the echo of His voice. Men bow humbly before Him, look longingly up to Him, lift their voices to Him, and go out to live and die for Him. A member of a reformed Hindu religious sect asked a Christian missionary, "What have you in your religion that we haven't in ours?" He replied, "Shall I tell you in a word? You have no Christ." As Ian Maclaren declared, "The lifeblood of Christianity is Christ." Upon this Foundation countless myriads have built. Here they have found salvation from sin, liberation from prison, emancipation from slavery, the Bread of Life for their hunger, the Water of Life for their thirst, sight for their blindness, amelioration from suffering, strength for their

weakness and rest from their weariness. Other foundation is neither permitted by God nor needed by man. Christ is the only adequate religious foundation. He did a work that none but God could have done. He is the only one who can save.

In this foundation are the rocks of sacrificial suffering and vicarious death. Paul's most powerful sermons centered in the sufferings and death of Christ. Here he found God's remedy for the sins of lost men. In Christ's suffering and death are the breadth of mercy, the limitless reaches of pardon, the blessing of forgiveness, the breadth of love, the example of condescension and the glow of life.

Life comes before growth. You may dig around a post, fertilize it, and water it daily, but it will not grow. It takes life for growth. So one must become a child of God, by believing on Christ as his Saviour, before he can grow as a Christian. Christian growth cannot begin until one has an experience of regeneration through Christ. The Christian life is meant to be a continuous experience of growth, from the time that one becomes a child of God until he departs this life. Spiritual retardation is one of the great tragedies in the lives of professing Christians today.