

“The Message and its Messengers”—1 Corinthians 3:5-7

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “The Message and its Messengers”, is 1 Corinthians 3:5-7 → *What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God Who gives the growth.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. 1Timothy 1:2). Amen.

“Oh! Grow up!” I wonder how many times this statement has been made in the midst of arguments, especially in marriages and family relationships. “Grow up!” is usually used in frustration and anger over the apparent immature attitudes or behaviors expressed as individuals and groups strive to function together. Of course, the statement leaves one wanting because of the difficulty of determining maturity within the huge amounts of emotion mixed with sinful selfishness. What does it really mean to “grow up?” I’ve heard people say, “Getting old is mandatory, growing up isn’t.”

In one sense, our text records the apostle Paul being forced into

telling the congregation of Christians in Corinth to “grow up.” Paul’s contact with these Christians happened during his 2nd missionary journey. The reception of the Gospel of Jesus Christ by these Christians was coupled with the desire to grow in their faith, evidenced by the fact that *he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them* (cf. Acts 18:11). In the book of Acts we are introduced to Apollos as a believer who met Paul in Ephesus. He is described as *an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus* (cf Acts 18:24-25). Apollos went to Corinth (cf. Acts 19:1) to serve the church there, maybe even being sent to continue helping those Christian *grow in the grace and knowledge of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (cf. 2 Peter 3:18) by Paul himself.

Over time a struggle arose within the congregation where members were actually pitting one teacher against another, such as Paul and Apollos. The focus of this devotion to one teacher over another is not clearly stated in the text. Apollos is described in Acts as *fervent in spirit* (cf Acts 18:25). According to 2 Corinthians 10:10 apparently there were some who said that even though Paul’s *letters were weighty and strong, . . . his bodily presence was weak, and his speech of no account*. Were these Christians in Corinth comparing their delivery in their sermons and placing more stock in Apollos’ message because he was a more

dynamic speaker or had a more dynamic personality?

This happens today when Christians focus on such characteristics of proclaimers of God's Word. How many times have statements been made which imply that it's the preacher's responsibility to keep the hearers awake during a sermon? How many times does the "evaluation" after worship of "What did you think about the pastor's sermon?" receive critique on his style of delivery and overshadow the message delivered? Since the message of the Gospel always comes through physical messengers it is the challenge of every Christian to seek growth in their faith in the proper place—the message, not the messenger.

The real struggle with such a focus on the way in which the message comes to us is not just in matters of opinion about styles of how that message is conveyed. The real struggle is the sin which is produced as satan gets a foothold in the hearts of God's people so that they hold contempt for one another in such division. This is why Paul began by addressing these Christian in our text with growth language in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2 → *I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as **infants** in Christ. I fed you **with milk, not solid food**, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, 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?*

Can you hear him saying, “Grow up!”? Acting *of the flesh* is acting in a sinful manner against God’s commands and will, in this case using God’s *servants* to cause divisions within Christ’s Church. So Paul put a proper perspective on the messengers in verse 5 of our text: *What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each his task.* The messengers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are not in competition with each others. Neither are they possessions of the Church to be idolized or manipulated in some fashion. Paul reminded them in the next chapter that they *should regard them as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God* (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:1). They are simply doing the tasks Jesus *assigned to each* as He has entrusted the dispensing of the means of grace to them.

So, continuing his picture of growing up in Christ, Paul says in verse 6 of our text: *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.* Paul brought them the Gospel of Jesus Christ, planting the seed of the Word of God amongst them. Afterward, Apollos nurtured that seed of God’s Word with continued teaching to help them grow in their faith relationship with Jesus. In it all, the Holy Spirit was at work to bring about that *growth* in grace. Simply put: *Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God Who gives the growth.* (verse 7)

Throughout the Scriptures the Christian Church is spoken about as a body growing in Christ Who is its Head. Colossians 2:19 speaks about

the importance of *holding fast to the Head* (i.e. Jesus), *from Whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows **with a growth that is from God***. So what is a *growth that is from God*? Is it leaning more Bible information? Is it being more involved in congregational organization? Is it feeling closer and closer to Jesus each day? Is it doing more and more good works for Jesus each day? Is it feeling more comfortable with talking about Jesus with others? What is a *growth that is from God*?

No doubt, such activities can be a display of your faith. To grow up into Christ happens with a focus on God's written Word through which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains your faith in Christ. As the Gospel spread over the world in that first century and people believed in Jesus as the Christ, their Savior from sin, numerous times Acts says *the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied* (cf. Acts 12:24 (NASB); 6:7; 19:20). Notice the focus is on God's revealed Word through which the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of people so they recognize their sins, repent of them and trust in Jesus and His atoning work for forgiveness.

Growing up in Christ means first and foremost encountering Him in His written Word with the same desire as expressed in the prayer of Psalm 119:11 → O LORD, *I have stored up Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You*. Instead of reading your Bible to simply become more knowledgeable about it's facts and information, growing

up in Christ means reading it so that you might be more discerning of sin in the midst of temptations to sin. It means recognizing your sin when it is revealed and confessing it to Jesus. Growing up in Christ happens as you learn more and more each day through God's Word how much you as a sinner need Jesus more and more.

It also means maturing in such humility that you will be willing to be corrected when not understanding God's Word properly. Apollos displayed such growth in faith as recorded in Acts 18:24-26. Even though he was *competent in the Scriptures, having been instructed in the way of the Lord by someone, and being fervent in spirit, speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, . . . he knew only the baptism of John* (i.e. John the Baptizer). *When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preach, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.* After this happened Apollos continued to preach and teach in Corinth. Notice he didn't walk away in a huff and pout because he was being corrected with God's Word like . . . a . . . three year old? Growing up in Christ means you will display a humility and willingness to hear and even be admonished from God's Word, seeing your need to learn obedience to the Lord everyday.

When your focus is on the message of the Person & Work of Jesus, the messenger is respected as a sinner, speaking this Word of God to sinners, releasing them from the burden of sin through the Gospel. He

is also viewed as a sinner teaching this Word of God so that you may *observe all that Jesus has commanded* you (cf. Matthew 28:20) and be Christ's servant to others in good works of love toward them. When the focus is on the message of God's written Word then the words of Jesus find their fulfillment in your life: *So . . . when you have done all that you were commanded, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."* (cf. Luke 17:10) Amen.

*Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus,
that as you received from us how you ought to walk
and to please God, just as you are doing,
that you do so more and more.*

(1 Thessalonians 4:1)

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