

Living the Epiphany Reality: God's Servants Working Together

By Dr. Dave Neale

Let's review briefly where we have been in our series, Living the Epiphany Reality. The general idea is that after the angels have fled the shepherds' field, after the wisemen have decamped, real life settles back in and we wonder how the revelation of the Messiah changes life.

The related question is 'In what way does that reality manifest in ordinary life – how does the Christ appear among us now?' That is, how does the Epiphany manifest in actual communities of faith. Our lectionary has directed us helpfully, to the Book of 1 Corinthians.

Three weeks ago we looked at the propensity of the Corinthians to break into partisan loyalties. Some said I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas, I belong to Paul. We contemplated how the image of the banyan tree is a metaphor for the diversity of the community of faith and how it grows together in something of a holy mess. But it is the tree of faith.

We observed that Paul was determined to draw them all back to Christ as the centre of their faith, rather than their favourite personalities, their pet theologies (hardly insignificant).

Two weeks ago we talked about the "foolishness of God" in that God chose to be made known in the most unlikely of all places – on a cross of suffering and humiliation. ***The cross is crazy to those who think they know everything they need to know about everything!*** (My paraphrase of 1 Cor 1:18)

Last week we expanded on that by reflecting on Paul's "decision" to know nothing among the Corinthians other than the cross of Christ.

In our text for today Paul returns to the subject of their divided loyalties to various teachers, gently upbraiding them for being so un-transcendent in their thinking - for relying on nothing beyond human consciousness in their relationships within the community – he calls this "human inclinations."

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food... For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations. (1 Cor 3:2-3)

There is a contrast of those of "the flesh" and those who are "spiritually minded" (πνευματικός, *pneuma*, *spiritual*/σαρκικός, *sarikos*, *fleshly*). Are you not, asks Paul, ***people of the flesh*** rather than ***spiritual people?***

Now, I'll spare you the tedious lexical examination of these words and cut to the chase...I wish I knew what this all meant. There would have been a time in the pride of my youth that I would have gladly explained to you – with some sort of theological shortcut or catchy slogan.

If it were so clear what this means, I don't see how there would have been such a need for instruction on it. What we have are dynamic, strong Christians who are operating in the ***flesh...***, what he goes on to define himself ***human inclination*** towards one another, and not according to the divine mindset, according to the 'Spirit.'

Certainly, there is a numinous quality that we experience as we walk in God's Spirit together. God's Spirit is among us. But the notion that we come to the fullness of the Spirit in life in just one moment of decision is quite mistaken.

Paul writes this message to *members of the community*, not the unsaved. Christians are no less subject to dwelling in merely human inclinations than anybody else. Look at the fractious nature of church life in general and you cannot say otherwise.

The reality in Corinth was that there was a marked tendency of its members to immaturity in their relations with one another. That is what this passage is about.

Don't think of the church there as gathering in a purpose-built sanctuary. We have a nice building and a staff of people to guide us. Nice music. Programs and study groups. Compassionate ministry.

The church in Corinth was a collection of house gatherings with various leaders taking things their own ways.

As an interesting sidebar, take a look at these pictures of Peter's house in Capernaum.

Peter's house in Capernaum was one of the first private dwellings that became, over the course of some decades, a dedicated place of meeting for Christians.



This demonstrates the nature of the church in these early years. The church was in homes. In hiding really, because of persecution. Paul addresses his greeting to Philemon **to the church in your house** (Philemon v2).

The "church" in Corinth was comprised of any number of fractious groups that are struggling to find the center in Christ together.

So here is what we do know from our text about the stages of the spiritual journey: You're **not ready for solid food** (v 2). You are in Christ, but you are immature.

He describes this colourfully as though we are **infants**, not able to do otherwise than take milk at a mother's breast, as it were (vss 1 and 2).

Progress on the path is indicated, not by some numinous, esoteric state of spirit-filled consciousness, but by the attitude toward and the treatment of others. What is the indicator that they are not ready for food? There is **jealousy and quarreling among you** (v3).

You really have to admire the colourful way Eugene Peterson put this in his paraphrase in The Message: **As long as you grab for what makes you feel good or makes you look important, are you really much different than a babe at the breast, content only when everything is going your way?** (v3)

So let no one boast about human leaders... for you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God (v 21).

I want to call this “get over yourself” theology.

Even Paul has a hard time with this. Take a look at chapter 4 where he writes a slightly acerbic defense of his ministry.

From the Text

First: Full spiritual maturity does not land all at once, automatically when we enter on our journey of faith. Spiritual maturity is a life-long enterprise. And, to be truthful, once it begins to appear in your life, there is no guarantee that you will not relapse into mere human inclination.

The reality is that, in Christ, we are constantly struggling to resist those deeply embedded characteristics. The task of the spirit-filled life is to exercise the moral/ethical and spiritual responsibility to choose the higher over the lower frame of mind.

And so make room for the Spirit of God to blow through our lives with the blessing and freedom of grace. The Spirit is a gift to the Christian, but we have the responsibility of Grace. We must choose Christ and the Spirit every moment, especially with respect to our relationship one to another.

Acquiring the spiritual mind is the work of a lifetime. So let's just settle in and get on with a long path toward a fulsome life in the Spirit. Will we fall back to infancy at times? Of course.

But we move forward, learning from each lesson in life, especially the hard ones, that there is another dimension to which the grace of God calls us.

So the first point is that to be spiritually minded is the work of a life-time.

Second: Everybody is different and we each have our native advantages – and we must accept this

The basis upon which spiritual maturity is measured: Can you accept that each person in the fellowship has their own contribution to make, ***...as the Lord assigned to each*** (v 5b)? Now I hope that makes your spirit exhale.

Peter Yang tells the story of how he asked someone on the Forbes 30 Under 30 list how he made VP at a top tech company before the age of 30. He said:

- 4:30 am wakeup
- Cold showers
- Gratitude journal
- Meditate
- Dad owns tech company

Everyone has their own native advantages.

According to the grace of God given to me (v 10), says Paul, I am a planter, laying a foundation. Apollos was a waterer.

For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

Mixed metaphors here and I think things get away from Paul a bit – but all intended to describe what happens in Christian community; you get the point.

I think I'm a waterer.

Finally, the person with the spiritual mindset is someone who understands:

- that everyone has their own part to play in community,
- that we need one another,
- that God is in it,
- that we are ***God's temple...house not made with hands*** (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 5:1).

It is our different strengths and inclinations that make us community of faith. But we have to accept each other as we are. Without jealousy. This guy's dad owns the tech company and I work in at McDonalds. Okay. Without envy of the other. Our strength is in *accepting* that diversity and celebrating it. We are a banyan tree!



And it would be good to remind ourselves in light of these words of Paul that a community of faith is a fragile entity. We are a volunteer organization. Everyone gives of their time and money from the goodness of their heart – from a spirit of altruism.

We channel that altruism out to all those who are in our circles of influence – the hand of God extended to our community. We believe it is the Spirit of God that calls us to this work and gives the whole enterprise a numinous life.

We return to the vision of the banyan tree. It is an amazing, noble and wonderful thing to be a community, and may God guide and protect in all that we do.

Thanks be God.

Amen