

Handout: 1 Corinthians Lesson 2

These people were carnal because they were still slaves to the desires of the present age. Although they had been baptized and had received the Holy Spirit, they were carnal because after their baptism they had returned to their old lives, which they had renounced ... Although they had been born again in Christ, they were not yet fit to receive spiritual things. Although they had received the faith which is the seed of the Spirit, they had produced no fruit worthy of God.
Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*

In Chapter 3, Paul uses two clusters of metaphors (“flesh” and “spirit”; “milk” and “food”) to present concepts to distinguish what Christian theologians will later call the “natural” and the “supernatural” person:

1. The natural person is one who allows natural or mortal principles to determine his existence, behavior, and perceptions and therefore remains only on the human level.
2. The supernatural person is one who centers his existence, behavior, and perceptions on Christ and the guidance of the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit.

In 3:5-9, St. Paul uses agricultural and architectural metaphors to explain the role of God's ministers in the fertile “field” God prepared for those who respond to God's grace in coming to faith in Jesus Christ:

- One minister “plants” in founding the Christian community.
- Another minister “waters” by preaching and teaching the newly formed community.
- The result is the “growth” of the community through the grace of God in “building” the Body of Christ that is the Church.

God's ministers labor in service to the Church; their accountability is to God and Jesus Christ.

3:15, *But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire.* CCC 1030: “All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.”

3:19-20, *For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God, for it is written: “God catches the wise in their own ruses,” and again: “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain.”* To support his point about the folly of human wisdom, Paul quotes from Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11. Paul uses the phrase “it is written” nine times to introduce ten of his Old Testament quotes: 1:19/Is 29:14; 1:31/Jer 9:23; 2:9/Is 64:3; 3:19/Job 5:13 and Ps 94:11; 9:9/Dt 25:4; 10:7/Ex 32:6; 14:21/Is 28:11-12; 15:45/Gen 2:7; 15:54/Hos 13:14.

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In 4:6-8, Paul accuses the Corinthian Christians of the sin of pride. The three questions in 4:7 have theological implications beyond the pride of the Corinthians and concern the spiritual gifts:

- The gift of faith that led to baptism.
- The charismatic gifts he mentioned in the “thanksgiving (1:4-7).
- The gift of the series of Spirit-filled preachers whose goal was to increase their faith.

However, the Corinthian boast as though these gifts are theirs through their own efforts.

In 4:6-8, with cutting irony, Paul names three negative traits (satisfaction, riches, kingship) that stem from their pride and parallel these traits with three questions:

1. They are complacent like the satisfied.
2. They are indolent like the rich.
3. They have become a law unto themselves like kings.

St. Thomas Aquinas writes concerning Paul’s criticism: “The Apostle here considers four types of pride: the first, when one thinks that what one has does not come from God [...]; the second, which is similar, when one thinks that one has done everything on one’s own merit; the third, when one boasts of having something which one does not in fact have [...]; the fourth, when one despises others and is concerned only about oneself” (Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*).

In 4:9-13, Paul catalogs the difficulties of the apostle’s existence in service to Christ and His Church, contrasting their sufferings with the Corinthians’ overconfidence:

- Fools to their wisdom
- Weak to their strength
- Held in disrepute to their status of honor

The apostles go hungry, are thirsty, badly clothed, treated roughly/persecuted, homeless, slandered, treated like rubbish, and they work with their hands to support themselves. Paul contrasts their bad treatment with the responses of Christ’s ministers to their treatment:

1. When they are ridiculed they bless.
2. When they are persecuted they endure.
3. When they are slandered they respond in gentleness.

In 4:17 Paul announces he is sending St. Timothy to them:

- Timothy was born at Lystra in Asia Minor, the son of a Greek father and a Jewish-Christian mother and grandmother.
- Paul had a deep fondness for Timothy and considered him a “son.”
- He was a missionary team member on Paul’s second and third missionary journeys.
- He ministered at Corinth and served as the Bishop of Ephesus.
- He is the co-sender of six of Paul’s letters.