

Paul wrote this letter to a church that had lots of problems. I'm a very positive person, so I think we have a lot of opportunities and challenges, but I don't like to use the word "problems." Any challenges that we have as a church are so minor and few when compared with the problems of the church in Corinth. There were three big problems, and they all start with "M"...maturity, morality, and mortality (they didn't understand what happened to a person when they die).

One of the biggest problems in the church was that it was full of immature baby Christians (carnal Christians). Carnal Christians tend to be very divisive. They like to divide up into cliques and argue about the most insignificant things. The other day a church member told me about being on the elevator with her grandkids. To her dismay, they got in the biggest squabble about who was going to push the button on the elevator! And she said, "I was just amazed at two perfect grandchildren who could get in a fight over something as insignificant as who pushes the elevator button." That is characteristic of immature Christians. They fuss about the simplest, most insignificant things.

Paul continues that discussion as he talks about how God grows a New Testament church. First Corinthians 3:5-9 says:

⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

I. THE KIND OF PERSON GOD BLESSES

Here was the problem in the church at Corinth. And it's very obvious. Paul had established the church, and there were some of the old timers in the church who just loved Paul because he had started the church and they were big fans, even though Paul was not that great of a preacher. He himself admitted that they were right when they said his letters were weighty, but his public speaking was very poor. Paul basically said, "I came to you with trembling and fearfulness. I didn't do a good job of preaching." So here comes a young whipper snapper named Apollos. He's young, charismatic, dynamic. He could preach the stars down, and there were some people in the church who just loved him.

So a division in that church resulted. Some were fans of Apollos; some were Paul's fans. Paul got all upset about that. He said they were acting like baby Christians, dividing up into little groups. That would be like someone in our church saying, "I

love Mike Parks, but I don't like Brother David. Or "I love Dennis Parrot, but I don't like Ken Brumley." That's the same kind of attitude that exists in churches today. And Paul says, that's a sign of immaturity. The kind of person God blesses is someone who understands two things:

1. Understands servanthood

He blesses the kind of person who understands servanthood. In verse 5, Paul mentions the word for "servant" that literally means a table waiter. It's our word for "minister." It's the idea of somebody who goes around waiting on tables. And he said, that's all I am. Preachers are the instruments that God uses. And so you shouldn't be bragging on us. You shouldn't be exalting us.

If a man had a successful operation, you wouldn't go around telling everybody what a wonderful scalpel they have down there in that operating room. The scalpel was the instrument in the hand of the surgeon. Instead, you'd go around talking about what a great surgeon it was. And that's what Paul is saying. If you want to brag on someone, brag on God, not the servant.

2. Understands spiritual gifts

God blesses the kind of person who understands spiritual gifts. spiritual gifts. Verse 5 says the Lord has assigned to each his task. The word "task" means that God has given everybody a certain job in the Body, in the church. In later chapters, Paul develops the idea of spiritual gifts. If you are a born again child of God, he has given you one or more spiritual gifts. Now these are abilities he's given you to minister. Paul said God gave Apollos the gift of preaching, so you shouldn't give him credit for it. And he said, God might have given him the gift of teaching or the gift of being an apostle, but he couldn't take credit for it. God gets all the credit for it. Not everybody can do the same thing, but everybody can do something.

I heard about a homebound woman confined to a wheelchair who lived in Mobile, Alabama. She wrapped gospel tracts in brightly colored pieces of cellophane paper and a piece of candy. When she filled up a bucket with them, a young seminary student who drove from New Orleans to Alabama every weekend would take them with him in his car. I know some people think this is littering, but he would toss those pieces of candy and the tracts out the window of his car, scattering them all the way on his journey. She had printed her name and address on the tracts, and over the years she got dozens and dozens of letters from people who became Christians because they found those tracts.

Isn't that amazing? Not everybody can do the same thing, but everybody can do something. Paul says, "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning spiritual gifts." If you don't know what your spiritual gift is, that's one thing you can find out. But are you using your spiritual gifts?

II. THE PLAN GOD BLESSES

God has a plan that he has always used to grow churches. There is an entire discipline of study called church growth. When I was going to Southern Seminary and I was getting my doctorate, that's what I emphasized in my study: evangelism and church growth.

And what that means is that you conduct a scientific study of churches all around the world that have experienced numerical growth, all the way from the church in the book of Acts to churches in Korea, to churches in North and South America. And you look for trends. You look for commonalities and factors that exist in all of those churches. What is it that makes a church grow numerically? the big argument in church growth is what is more important? Numerical church growth or spiritual growth? In other words, numerical growth is taking a church that's running 200 people every week and doing anything you can to make that church run 500 in attendance. Spiritual growth is where immature Christians grow in the faith till they become mature Christians. And that's the big debate in church growth. What's more important...numerical growth or spiritual growth?

You have people who argue at both poles, but I believe the two are not mutually exclusive. You cannot have one without the other. You cannot have true numerical growth unless there is spiritual growth. When Christians are truly growing, there will be numerical growth because that's God's plan. All you have to do is read the book of Acts where the Lord “added daily” to the church those who were saved.

1. God's plan involves a join effort

It's something that all of us work on together. Paul uses an agricultural metaphor here. Now, I don't know about how many of you have ever planted a garden or lived on a farm, but he employs the kind of terminology that all the people in his day would understand. He says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow.” Now he mentions several steps in what it takes to grow a church or what it takes to grow a garden.

Plowing

As it says in Jeremiah, you must break up the fallow ground. You've got to prepare the soil before you can drop a seed in it. You don't just go out there to the hard ground in your backyard and drop a seed on the top of the ground. It won't work. You've got to soften up the dirt. Now, what does it mean spiritually speaking to soften up someone's heart? It means building bridges of friendship and creating an atmosphere of trust so that you can plant the seed of the gospel. It's the ministry of preparation, and God may have given you the ministry of preparation. It may be that some of you may not be good at planting seeds, but you're really good at developing relationships and friendships. You may not feel skilled enough to tell someone how to accept Christ, but you have a gift for finding somebody who's lonely without Christ, befriending them, baking cookies for them, washing their car, cutting their yard, and inviting them to church. You're plowing the ground.

You're making their hearts fertile and receptive to the gospel. And then that brings us to the second step in the process.

Planting the seed

Elsewhere, Jesus used the story of a man who took seed and he planted it. And Jesus said the seed is the word of God; the soil is the heart of an individual. First, we've got to soften the heart, prepare the heart. And that may be the ministry of some of you. But others have the ministry of planting the seed. That means telling people about Jesus, letting them know what it means to be a Christian and sharing with them the basic tenants of the Christian life. You ought to scatter a lot of seed everywhere you go. The more seeds you scatter, the more people are going to come to know Christ. The more fruit there's going to be. If you want a big patch of turnip greens, you plant a lot of seeds. But if you just want a little bit of turnip greens, you just drop a few seeds. So scatter those seeds everywhere!

What are the different ways you could scatter seeds? Gospel tracts are a good way to do that. Whenever you go into a restaurant and leave a tip for the waiter or the waitress, make sure you leave a good tip, but you may want to leave a gospel tract as well. When you meet someone new and have a brief conversation with them, you can speak a word for Jesus. It may be at the grocery store. It may be at the gasoline station. That's planting a seed. When you meet somebody and you tell them about what Jesus Christ is doing in your church, you're planting seeds. Planting seeds is when you tell somebody about Jesus Christ; you don't have to give them the gospel steps to becoming a Christian. You're just testifying about Jesus. A person who plants seeds is patient. And that's exactly what Paul is saying. I planted, then somebody else watered.

Watering the seed

Maybe you give somebody a gospel tract, and they read it. Or maybe you're at the grocery store and you just tell somebody about Christ. And then maybe a couple of days later, they come across an evangelist preaching on television. Because you have just spoken to them about Jesus, and because the seed has been planted, they're going to stop for a moment and listen. They might not accept Jesus that night. But Billy Graham or Charles Stanley or some other television preacher is watering the seed you planted. And by the same token, you may be watering the seed in somebody else's life when you encourage them, when you speak a word for Christ. The seed may already be there. But when you give them that tract, or you encouraged them, or said something about Jesus, you are watering it.

Harvesting the seed

In verse 6 Paul says that he planted, Apollos watered, but it was God who made it grow. In this metaphor, a harvest is somebody accepting Jesus Christ. The church, the Body of Christ, is a team, and we ought to be working together. It is not the responsibility of any one person to plow, to plant, to water, and to harvest.

Sometimes that happens, but usually it is a team effort. There's a great book by Jim Peterson entitled *Lifestyle Evangelism*. He writes, "God never intended evangelism to be an individualistic effort. The biblical pattern is for the individual's witness to be carried on within the setting of a corporate effort." The corporate effort means the church's witness.

In other words, we work on these steps together. Somebody else might have plowed. You plant. Then somebody else waters. Then at the right time a person comes to you and they say, "I just need to know how to be saved. I'm ready to accept Jesus right now. Can you tell me how to be saved?" We do that on Sunday mornings at the church when our invitation counselors talk to people after the invitation and sit down with them with a Bible. They do a lot of harvesting. You know why? Because different ones of you have planted and watered already... and then they just harvest. God has given some people that gift. One of my best friends is the evangelist Kelly Green. He is just gifted by God at harvesting. Sometimes he doesn't even preach. He just gives the invitation, and people who have had seeds planted in their lives, and they've been watered, are ready for a harvest and they accept Christ.

No one person controls this process. The person who prepares the soil does not control it. The person who plows doesn't control it. The person who plants doesn't control it. The person who waters doesn't control it. The person who harvests doesn't control it. God controls it. A lot of Christians don't witness because they feel like they failed before in the past if someone doesn't accept Christ when they witness. Nobody likes to fail at anything. They feel like they're unworthy. If you have ever led anybody to Jesus Christ, it's a great joy. Did you take credit for that? Did you say, "Look what I did. I saved this person." Of course not. So, when you witness for Jesus Christ and that person doesn't accept Christ, you can't accept the blame.

You're doing exactly what God told you to do. Plant the seed, bear the witness. God is the one that controls the process.

2. God's plan involves a joyful prospect

Psalm 126:5 says those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying his seed, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

When I was a kid, we didn't have clothes dryers. We hung them out on the clothesline. I can just picture my mom taking sheets and hanging them on the clothesline. They smelled so good when they'd been dried outside. And I can just remember seeing her going out there and taking those sheets off the line and bringing them back into the house. As a kid, I noticed that we even had a song about that. We sang it in church: "Bringing in the sheets, bringing in the sheets. We shall come rejoicing bringing in the sheets." That's exactly what I thought we

were singing in church! I wondered why everybody was getting so excited about bringing sheets in off the line.

What I didn't understand is we weren't singing about bringing in the sheet! We were talking about bringing in the *sheaves*. That song is all about the joy that occurs in the life of a Christian when we get to participate in the harvest of bringing in the sheaves. You remember what Jesus said to his disciples in John chapter four? "Lift up your eyes and look on the fields for they are white unto harvest." All you have to do is go out there and harvest the people. I honestly believe there are people in your school, on your job, and in your neighborhood whose hearts have been plowed. The gospel has been planted. Somebody else has watered it. And Jesus says the field is ready to harvest! All you have to do is go out and bring them in to Jesus.

The Bible says when you are burdened enough go out weeping, you'll come back singing songs of joy. If we go out with a half-hearted attitude, we come back weeping because no one was saved. The biblical pattern is you go out with such a burden that you're weeping. You come back rejoicing. It's like the young seminary-trained preacher who felt so good about himself that he strutted into the pulpit with his polished sermon. He had a lot of arrogance and pride, with a big smile on face. He proceeded to preach what he thought was the best sermon that could ever be preached. But the more he preached the bigger mess he made. He walked out of the pulpit in a spirit of utter failure and humility. And a wise old preacher took him aside and said, "Son, if you'd have walked into the pulpit the way you walked out of the pulpit, you would've walked into the pulpit the way you walked out of it."

In other words, if you had walked in it with a spirit of humility and a broken heart, you would have walked out of it with a spirit of joy. But because you walked into it with arrogance, you walked out broken. That's God's pattern.

III. THE PARTNERSHIP GOD BLESSES

In verse 9, Paul says we are God's fellow workers. The word "fellow workers" means that we're all teammates. We're in this thing together. We've got to work together. I once read about a Naval battle that took place back in the 1800s between two warships. In the middle of the night, they approached each other and began firing their cannons. And they fought throughout the night. Both ships were damaged, and many sailors were killed. When the sun came up the next morning, they discovered to their horror that both ships were flying the English flag!

That's a problem in the church today; we aim our guns at each other. You've heard the expression that the church is the only army that shoots its wounded. We ought not to be pointing our guns at each other. We ought to be pointing our guns at the enemy. The enemy is out there: the world, the flesh, and the devil. And that's what Paul's trying to tell these immature Christians at Corinth who were divided up in their own little cliques. He told them to work together as God's team.

When you are a partnership, God can bless you. The last part of verse nine says you're God's field. What that means is God's trying to plant a great crop in a big field, and you're one clod of dirt. A field is made up of clods of dirt that join together to make a field. He says a building is made up of bricks and stones, and one stone doesn't make a building. You put them together, and you are something. One little tiny snowflake is not very impressive, is it? But you put billions of those things together, and it'll stop a city in an instant.

One little Christian may not seem like much. But you put the church together, and God can do mighty things. I did a children's sermon at my former church where I gave this little boy a little twig and asked him if he could break it. He took that twig and broke it very easily. And then I handed him a bundle of twigs, which would be harder to break. My illustration was that one Christian by themselves may not be very strong, but you put a bunch of Christians together, and there is strength in numbers. Meanwhile, the little boy had walked back to the choir rail and cracked that bundle of twigs on the rail! So much for a children's sermon! But I thought it was a good point. Paul is saying there's great strength in numbers. Years ago in the mid-1970s, *Decision* magazine published by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association studied 12 of the greatest churches in America. And they came up with seven characteristics of a growing New Testament church. I want these to be the kind of characteristics that describe our church.

1. Prayer.

An emphasis on prayer. Prayer was a ministry. Prayer was work. Prayer was warfare.

2. Witnessing

Members of the church went out during the and actively shared their faith with their friends. Interestingly enough, there was very little evangelistic preaching at these great churches. People were saved, not in the worship services, but throughout the week through the individual witness of the members.

3. Conversions

People were being saved and brought into the life of the church. People were being baptized. The waters of the baptistry were constantly moving.

4. Joy

There was an atmosphere of joy in these churches. There was just an excitement and an attitude of heartfelt joy.

5. Preaching and teaching

There was an emphasis on Bible-based preaching and Bible-based teaching in these churches.

6. Goals

These churches were goal-oriented. They knew what their purpose was, and they set goals to accomplish those purposes.

7. Love

These churches were characterized by love. They loved all races of people, all socioeconomic groups of people, all kinds of people. They loved young people, old people, middle-aged people.

CONCLUSION

Buzz Aldrin will always be remembered as the second man to put his foot on the moon. Did you know a number of years after that trip to the moon Buzz had a nervous breakdown? He said, "I had a breakdown in my life is because for so many years I was moving toward a goal of going to the moon. And when I accomplished that goal, I lost contact with those people that I worked with. I lost contact with God and his direction for my life. And I no longer had a goal to live for."

So his life just fell apart. A Christian never should have to say that. Our goal should always be to let God be growing us, because the way God grows the church is the same way he grows individual members.

OUTLINE

I. THE KIND OF PERSON GOD BLESSES

- 1. Understands servanthood**
- 2. Understands spiritual gifts**

II. THE PLAN GOD BLESSES

- 1. God's plan involves a join effort**

Plowing

Planting the seed

Watering the seed

Harvesting the seed

- 2. God's plan involves a joyful prospect**

III. THE PARTNERSHIP GOD BLESSES

- 1. Prayer**
- 2. Witnessing**
- 3. Conversions**
- 4. Joy**
- 5. Preaching and teaching**
- 6. Goals**
- 7. Love**

CONCLUSION