

If you were to think back over your life, who would be the most significant people, who have had a major impact, in your formation as a Christian?

I suspect, for many who grew up in a Christian home, their parents or their grandparents, may have been that significant person... Or maybe a Sunday School teacher; or an RE teacher; or a youth group leader; or a speaker at a Christian camp.... ; or a pastor; or a minister; or an evangelist...

Many of us, will recall people who 'laid the foundation' – someone who led us to faith in Christ and helped us to understand 'the basics of the gospel'.

Others, may recall someone who was able to take us deeper. They may **not** be the one who started us **off** in the Christian faith, but they've helped us to **grow** in our faith and to **grow** our understanding... They may have a Spiritual gift of "teaching", and so they have a gift, of being able to help us to understand, what God is saying in His word.,,, And they can teach, in such a way, that we 'get it'. And we not only "know stuff", but we "know how to rightly apply it", in all sorts of circumstances we may encounter in life...

And so, **most** of us will have a favourite bible teacher (or maybe 2 or 3 of them) – people who have influenced us greatly, as we've grown in the knowledge of Christ...

The teaching ministry, is a very important gift and ministry, within the Christian Church. Without it, we hardly grow... When we get to chapter 12 of this same letter, Paul ranks the teaching ministry as No.3, coming in after the ministries of

Apostles (think of those as “the ones who wrote the New Testament”) and the Prophets (those who actually speak the words of God)... And so the Teaching ministry, is a very significant and very important ministry.

God has provided teachers, to rightly teach His word.... Through their teaching, they build the church up. And so God provides teachers to the church, (why?) so we can grow...

*And as I think back over **my** growth as a Christian, God has always provided gifted teachers, to help me to learn and to grow... Some of these have been local; But some of them, (And this is going to date me), but some of them have taught me through a cassette ministry, where cassette recordings of their messages have been available across the world; and then, Some of their teaching, has been written (that’s right, I actually have to read it)... But God has always provided teachers, to help me to grow...*

And he does the same for you.

But sometimes, individuals, or maybe even a whole church, **cease** to grow. And this is what today’s reading is about...

A couple of weeks ago, when we studied chapter 2, Paul was telling the Corinthian church, that when he first planted that church, he laid the foundation. That’s all he **could** do, because they were brand new Christians, and they weren’t ready to go deeper. And so, as a teacher, he laid the foundations of the Gospel...

But that isn't the **end** of the roll of a teacher. Paul went on to say: V⁶ **Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom.....** and in verse 13 he said that "we" (referring to him and the other bible teachers) interpret **spiritual truths, to those who are spiritual.**

Alright, he wanted to take them further, just as soon as they're spiritually mature... So, then we asked, "Who are the spiritually mature?"

- Is it those "who know stuff?"
- Is it those who know the Bible, and can quote it - chapter and verse? Or;
- "Is it those who have been Christians for years or decades?"

And the answer was, "Maybe... Maybe not..."...

The evidence of spiritual maturity, is Christ-likeness. The spiritually mature, have the mind of Christ. They think like Christ thinks, and so they demonstrate the character of Christ, in their lives... It's not only about what we know – it's how we apply what we know, and how the fruit of the Spirit, is the very essence of our character (^{Galatians 5:22} ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control)

And **now**, as Paul writes to this church in Corinth, he **wants** to take them deeper, but he knows they're: either not going to understand it; or they're not going to accept what he has to say. (why?) Because only a spiritual person can understand the things of God, and every bit of evidence, was pointing to the fact that these people, (even though they were a church)

were not a spiritual people. They were behaving in a very **un-**Christ-like way.

He says:

3 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ 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?

When Paul says “there is jealousy and strife among you”, that’s a very telling phrase.... And it illustrates a fine line, that we Christians walk...

In the Greek, the word that we translate here as “jealousy”, is “ζήλος” (Zelos), which **can** be used in exactly the same way in which we use **our** word “zealous”, which is a good thing... We can have “zeal” in a good way... **Or** we can have “zeal” in a bad way...

For the **Greek** word “zelos”,:

*There are two clear meanings depending on the object of the zeal. Where the goal is **good**, zēlos means eager striving, competition, enthusiasm, admirationⁱ*

And so we can be zealous in our praise of God. We can be zealous in striving to live righteously. It means we're really keen to put our full effort into it...

Are there any zealous Christians here??? I hope so. A zealous Christian will always be sharing their faith, and always telling people about Jesus....

But when:

*In a bad sense, the zeal has had a **wrong** goal and has become a **defect**; it **then** means jealousy, ill-will, envy. [And so therefore, a] zealot, can mean one seeking to reach good goals or [a zealot could be] a jealous man, an envious man.ⁱⁱ*

A spiteful man – doing whatever they can to put a stop, to that, with which they disagree...

And so we might **feel** that we're being zealous for God, but if our mind, is not the mind of Christ, our zeal may become terribly destructive...

And that's what was happening in Corinth. Their zealousness was accompanied by "strife", which is "*conflict [coming] from rivalry and discord*"ⁱⁱⁱ. And the Greek word "ἔρις" (strife), is quite often a **verbal** form of discord:

'always saying bad things about one another' or 'never having a good word to say to one another.'^{iv}

And for Paul, that was clear evidence, that they weren't a spiritual people. They were zealous alright, but their zeal was destructive... They thought they were being zealous for God, but their zeal produced discord; and criticism; and they only had bad words to say, as they put the other down...

What they were doing, was behaving in a very human way – not in a Christ-like way.

And they had come to the point, of developing factions within the church...

What that means, is they would argue with one another, and they would claim “authority” and “rightness” for their position, because they follow a particular teacher, and “You, well you wouldn’t know, because you follow that other teacher. (that inferior teacher)”

You know, I reckon most godly teachers would be horrified, if they found that their name was being invoked, to create divisions in a church. And Paul tells us why:

^{v4} For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul?

We’re servants – We’re lowly slaves...

We live in the era of ‘celebrity preachers’. And yes, we can all think of teachers, who have helped us to grow in our faith, but let’s never put these people, up on a celebrity pedestal, and say “That’s my authority” “I follow them”...

Paul said **“⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but **God** gave the growth.**

And that's the way it is... ⁸ **He who plants and he who waters are one...**

God provides **all** gifted and godly teachers, to help us to grow. But the teacher never makes us grow – **God** makes us grow... Remember, it's only the Holy Spirit, who can reveal to us, the things of God... I could **surround** myself with spiritually gifted, Godly teachers, but unless I'm in tune with the Holy Spirit, I'm not going to accept what they have to say...

And you might say to me, “But Michael, what if a teacher is giving me wrong teaching?”, and “Yep”, that's a very valid concern to have... Jesus told us to watch out for false teachers... And that's why Paul here, talks in terms of “building on the foundation of Jesus Christ.”

False teachers, will teach what is contrary, to the foundation of the Gospel. So for example:

- If someone were to teach that Jesus is one of many ways to get to heaven, that would be a false teacher.
- If someone were to teach that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, that would be a false teacher.
- If someone were to teach that “By being good and doing nothing bad, you can be saved.”, that would be a false teacher;
- If someone were to teach that we don't need to repent of our sins to be saved, or that we don't have to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved, that would be a false teacher...

But even so, many teachers, who agree with the foundation of the gospel, **disagree**, on all sorts of **other** issues to do with the Christian faith...

So for example:

- One teacher might teach a ‘prosperity’ message (God wants you to be rich). Whereas another teacher may teach, well, that kind of message is a craving of the flesh, and not of the spirit.
- One teacher might teach a ‘name-it-and-claim-it’ message (say this, believe it, and it will be done). Whereas another teacher may teach about the Lordship of Christ, and how we submit to Jesus Christ as Lord, and we seek His will above our will.
- One teacher may teach that (near the end of time), all the Christians are going to get taken out of the world before the troubles and the persecutions begin... Whereas another teacher will show through the Scriptures, how God will be giving Christians strength, as they bear the persecutions...

Alright, these are not issues that destroy the foundation of the Gospel, but 2 opposing arguments can't **both** be right, can they??? And some of these issues, are very important issues...

There is only one foundation – the gospel of Jesus Christ... Godly teachers, will rightly build on this foundation. But what they teach (What **I** teach), will be tested by God...

It's really important that we get it right. But even so, I know I'm not infallible. And I know the heart of man – **No** teacher is infallible... And that's one of the reasons I spend so much time, preparing for a message: Reading the Scriptures; Praying for guidance; listening to other teachers; reading good quality commentaries,,,, because I don't want to teach you something that's untrue...

And I hope that, even after all that, you don't just take my word for it, but that when go home, you prayerfully and diligently search the Scriptures, to see whether what I've said **is** true...

But ultimately, it is God who will test the work of the teacher.

Paul uses the example of a building. **like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.**

And then he lists 2 different types of building materials – some are valuable and lasting... Others are cheap, flimsy and flammable...

And basically, what he's saying, is that when Jesus returns, what has been taught, is going to be tested with fire. And if what a teacher has taught, is of lasting value, that teacher will be rewarded. But if the teaching is shown to be empty; fleshly; unspiritual,,, that person will suffer loss. If they're a Christian, they'll still be saved, but just 'by the skin-of-their-teeth'.

So, that's a warning for those who teach, and at this point I can only speak for myself, but I take this very seriously, and most teachers **I** know, **also** take this very seriously...

So, what Paul is saying, is: We teachers, are fellow workers, merely doing what God has called us to do. You are God's field. You are God's building... God is making you grow, and part of that growth, is through our ministry as teachers.....

And from V16, Paul comes down (pretty hard) on the Corinthian church (Why?) Because God had provided them with a package deal of teachers, (and they were good ones) (Paul; Apollos; Peter) – the package deal of teachers to help them grow. But they only wanted teachers who would affirm them in their divisive position within the church... And they **were** divisive. They were destroying God's temple.

^{V16} Do you not know that you are *God's temple* and that *God's Spirit dwells in you*?

Now, most of us think of this as “I am God's temple”; “My body is God's temple”... And when we get to 6:19, that's exactly what it's saying. But that's not what it's saying here. Here, it's specifically talking about “the church”. Not the individual, but the gathering. You (plural) are God's temple (singular). Don't you know this????

And here's the warning: If you destroy God's temple, God will destroy you...

Wohhhh.. That's hard words to a church that's filled with jealousy and strife... God's temple is holy. Your brothers and sisters in Christ, are the church. The church is holy. They are set apart for God... If a person has been set apart for God, as part of his holy church (no matter how imperfect they may seem to me), if I destroy that person, or if I destroy a church,,,, God will destroy me...

Wohhhh!!!

This is serious stuff...

Factions and divisions within a church, cause all sorts of harm. But here Paul focuses our attention, primarily, on two things:

Firstly, as we've just discovered, factions and divisions with a church, destroy God's church, and they destroy individual Christians. And this is no little matter. God will destroy those who destroy His set apart ones.

Secondly, factions and divisions, deprive us of opportunities to grow, through God's teachers.

The picture that Paul paints here, of the Corinthian church, is awful. They are a people who are self-deceived. They are so self-righteous, and they are so confident that they themselves, are wise, and everybody else is foolish,, and so for them, ministry (and particularly the teaching ministry) has become an instrument of self-affirmation. They will only listen to a teacher if that teacher will affirm them in what they already feel about themselves. And the challenge of the cross and their perception of what it means to be "spiritual", is distorted and broken^v.

They thought that they were wise, and that they knew everything there was to know... They felt that they were spiritually superior (even to the teachers that God had sent to them),,, But isn't it so true, that God catches the wise in their craftiness.

Righto,

V²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours

And it goes on to explain how **all** the teachers, and not only the teachers, but the world, and life and death, is all God's grand design, for us to grow... One commentary I read puts it like this:

*“Why do you limit yourselves by claiming that you belong to a particular teacher? Do you not realise that **all** teachers, indeed all **things** that are, belong to you in Christ?” So, far from enriching themselves by staking their claim to exclusive rights in one teacher, the Corinthians were impoverishing themselves. They were cutting themselves off from greater treasures that were really theirs.^{vi}*

A lot of years ago, a 'so-called' prophet was invited to one of the Pentecostal churches in town, and I went along to hear what he had to say. Let's just say, "He had a fair bit of wacky teaching..." But he did say one thing that night, that I've always remembered, "Keep the meat, and spit out the bones." Well, there wasn't much meat to be kept that night, but I did keep that saying.

And I have a bit of a problem sometimes: When I hear a Christian teacher say something that I don't agree with, my natural reaction is to call into question everything he says... But if I stopped listening to every teacher, every time I disagreed with any little point, I'd very soon stop growing. And so, I might hear a bible teacher on Christian radio, and think, "Well, that's rubbish",,, but then some of the next few phrases, can be real pearls of Godly wisdom... Do I throw out the pearls because I didn't agree with the rubbish before that??? Of course not. It's just another opportunity for me to grow in Christ. It's an opportunity to explore with **another** teacher why I do, or don't agree, with what that first teacher said.

So, what opportunities is God giving us, to grow in Him? Or perhaps more to the point, are we spiritually mature enough, too **be** growing?

Do I have a teachable heart? Or, am I merely looking for a teacher, who will affirm me in what I feel to be right?

The gift and the ministry of teaching, is God's gift to us, the church. Its purpose, is to help us to grow. I need to grow, as much as you need to grow. But let us never put a teacher up on a pedestal and say "that's my man"... A teacher is nothing but a lowly slave. A teacher can't make you grow. It's God who makes us grow... Just the thing is, God chooses to use teachers to do it...

When we hear the word of God being explained by a teacher, the Spirit of God inside of us, is what makes us grow.

Questions...

ⁱ H.-Hahn, C., 1986. Z L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, & H. Bietenhard, eds. *New international dictionary of New Testament theology*.

ⁱⁱ H.-Hahn, C., 1986. Z L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, & H. Bietenhard, eds. *New international dictionary of New Testament theology*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Louw, J.P. & Nida, E.A., 1996. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*.

^{iv} Louw, J.P. & Nida, E.A., 1996. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*.

^v Some contend that the main burden of warning falls on aspiring teachers. But the context of 3:21b, 22a and 4:3–5, combined with the stress on “order” in 3:23, points to the folly of those who “cheat themselves” out of the ministerial resources which God provides for their assistance and growth (cf. 3:5–7). Either those who were “foolish” wished to dispense with all ministerial agency (cf. those “of Christ” in 1:12) or more probably they used their selected favourites to confirm what they already believed and wished to believe, refusing to be challenged by the corporate ministry which God had assigned (cf. those of “Peter,” or of “Apollon,” 1:12). Ministry now becomes an instrument of mere self-affirmation, and the challenge of the cross and the fullness of the Spirit may become distorted or fragmented.

In: Thiselton, A.C., 2000. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

^{vi} Morris, L., 1985. *1 Corinthians: an introduction and commentary*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.