

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART FOUR

Having just decided that there are two kinds of man, the natural man who has no understanding of the thoughts of God because he does not have the Holy Spirit, and the spiritual man who can understand because the Spirit living in him gives him the mind of Christ, Paul now pointed out a snag. There are two kinds of Christian, the spiritual man who has grown up in Christ and the spiritual baby who has not. The baby Christian, Paul describes as the 'man of the flesh', sometimes translated as the 'carnal man', in whom the flesh, the old nature, is in charge. The baby Christian is easy to recognise, first by his diet of spiritual milk and then by his childish, competitive behaviour. A milk diet is one in which someone else has already processed the food. It is also exactly the same menu over and over again, instead of exploring the whole breadth of scripture. A reliance on spiritual milk pictures a dependence on someone else to teach us because of an inability or unwillingness to learn how to seek answers from God for ourselves. As teachers our responsibility is not only to feed young Christians but to teach them how to feed themselves.(3:1-3)

The baby Christian follows a human leader rather than Christ, as a baby looks always to his mother. This is the root cause of the first reason for division which Paul discussed in chapter one. Just as growing up as a child causes us to look to our heavenly Father rather than earthly parents, so we are to see beyond our earthly teachers to our Teacher in heaven.(3:4,5)

Paul next changed his illustration from babies to seeds. Human teachers like Paul and Apollos are simply farmers planting truth in human hearts and nurturing it. Growth is something God produces. It does not matter which teacher planted the seed and which one watered it. The good seed in the Bible is the word of God,(Lk.8:11) and water pictures the Holy Spirit.(Jn.7:37-39) There is enormous reward and satisfaction in being part of the gardening team whom God uses to bring others to maturity in Christ. Again the simple answer to small plants which have not grown is to water and feed them.(3:6-9)

Paul's third picture is that of a building constructed by a team in which someone lays the foundation and another puts up the walls and the roof. What matters is not who does what but the materials each uses. Disastrous earthquakes remind us of the importance of high building standards and good materials. The only foundation for the Christian life is a faith in Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord.(Matt.16:16-18; 7:24-27) Membership of a Christian organisation is not enough. In the same way if the walls are built of dead materials, wood, hay and straw, our own efforts, they will not survive the fiery end of history,(II Pet.3:10) or even tough times now. Only the permanent materials, gold, silver, precious stones, which are God working through us, will last for eternity.(3:10-15)

The Lord not only founds and builds our relationship with Him through people like Paul and Apollos, He also lives in us, whether we are baby Christians or spiritual men. As the owner-occupier of our bodies, He will protect His house from those who seek to destroy us by false teaching. Here 'you' is plural because He lives in us collectively; in 6:19 it is singular, emphasising our personal relationship and responsibility to our owner-occupier.(3:16,17)

In the last few verses of the chapter, Paul linked together the themes of chapters 1-3. Following earthly leaders instead of Jesus is the result of remaining a baby Christian. We stay spiritual babies because in our arrogance we think we know it all when in reality we know very little. Paul quoted from Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11 to prove his point - God is so much smarter than us, so why not learn from Him?

4:1-5 Q.1 What is our relationship with Jesus Christ and the gospel according to this section? If we fail in our responsibility whose job is it to judge us? How and when will God judge His servants? What are we doing when we pass judgement on the behaviour of someone else? Is our conscience an adequate guide to our standing before God?

4:6-8 Q.2 How were the Corinthians exceeding their responsibility? What leads us to such behaviour? What view of ourselves causes us to judge others? How may we misinterpret success and prosperity in our lives?(Jas.5:1-5)

4:9-13 Q.3 How did Paul and the other apostles compare with the Corinthian Christians? Did this mean Paul had failed and they had succeeded in God's terms? How did Paul describe his own condition? How can we reconcile this list with the idea of belonging to a loving God who meets our every need?(Phil.4:19)

4:14-16 Q.4 How did Paul see his relationship with the Corinthians? How did this affect his way of dealing with them and their problems? Why does it make a big difference if we use the other approach he described to deal with struggling baby Christians?

4:17-21 Q.5 What other approach apart from a letter did Paul intend to use to help this church? What would be the characteristics of both his and Timothy's visits to them? What two ways may a father use in dealing with his children? How does each way have its place in pastoral care?