

Are We Infants in Christ?

I can think of worse things than being “infants in Christ.” Consider this picture, which is in our hymnal [VT 230]. What do you see? I see a mother holding her baby with tenderness, love, and joy. And I see that baby reaching up to his mother in wonder and in complete dependence. This is in the Advent section of the hymnal, so we can assume that the baby is Jesus and the mother is Mary. But what if we imagine the baby as each of us, and the mother as Jesus? What do you see now? I see the baby—me—as filled with wonder and totally dependent on Jesus, in whose loving arms I am being tenderly held. That’s an image worth meditating on.

But when Paul referred to the Corinthians as “*infants in Christ*,” he clearly did not mean it as a compliment. He is scolding them! Did you catch his complete about face, his 180-degree turn? In the previous passage (which we looked at last week), Paul was speaking of them as having received “*not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God*.” He says that “*those who are spiritual discern all things, they are themselves subject to no one else’s security*,” and he implies that they (the Corinthians) are among those who are spiritual, because they “*have the mind of Christ*.” But then look at the very next verse. After reminding them once again that they are *brothers and sisters*—in other words, family—he says to them “*I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather . . . as infants in Christ*.” And he extends the metaphor—and the excoriation—by saying “*I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready*.”

What is he talking about, so abrasively? He gives us two clues: one general, the other very specific. The first, more general clue is when he calls them “people of the flesh.” Well, yeah, aren’t we all? Aren’t we all human spirits housed in fleshly bodies? And aren’t we all good in God’s eyes?

But when Paul uses the word flesh in his letters—and he uses it 64 times—he often is not simply talking about our human bodies (which by the way he does believe are fundamentally good). What he’s talking about is our living in a way that is focused entirely on ourselves, driven by our own needs and wants. And this, he implies, is fundamentally an immature, childish, infantile way to live.

The second clue he gives us is much more specific. “*For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?*” And guess what? There is jealousy and quarreling among them. Paul has already brought it up, it way back in 1:10. It had been reported to him by Chloe’s people. [Verse 11] And now Paul is disappointed. He’s hurt. And he’s mad. Because they should know better. It’s as if they had forgotten—or worse, never really listened in the first place—to the very gospel he and Apollos had shared with them!

Do you remember what they were quarreling about? They had apparently taken sides—some of them with him, some of them with Apollos. But the gospel is not about them. Never was. Paul and Apollos are merely “*Servants through whom you came to believe*.” What the gospel was and is about is Jesus Christ. Who emptied himself, gave up his life for them on the cross. And they are arguing about who is right and who is wrong?! They should know better. Paul is essentially telling them to act their age. And no one likes to be scolded. No one ever likes to be told they are being immature, or childish, or infantile.

Now we come to the hard part. Are we infants in Christ? Do we look more like this [*first picture*]? Or like this [*second picture*]? (On Friday I asked Kara to see if she could find on the internet a picture of two children arguing, and she found this!)

Maybe the question we really need to answer is, do we understand that the gospel is not about us, but rather about Jesus Christ? Who emptied himself and gave up his life on a cross for us? Do we understand that this is what we too are being asked to do in the way we live in our lives? And especially in the way we relate to one another as members and participants at First Mennonite Church? Do we sometimes relate to one another with jealousy or quarreling?

There is nothing wrong with disagreeing with one another from time to time. After all, that's part of how God created us and gifted us, to each have our own thoughts and opinions, to view things in different ways. It's how we disagree that matters. Do we do so in a spirit of love and humility? Or do we need to be right? Do we care more about our own opinions? Or do we care as much about the opinions and contributions of others? If not more so? Do we understand that as followers of Christ (which as Christians and especially as Mennonites we say we are), we are called to empty ourselves just as Jesus did, to live lives of faithful discipleship modeled on the Cross? Do we understand that people are watching us?

That doesn't mean it will be easy. It's not supposed to be. Which is precisely why people will notice. And that certainly doesn't mean we will always get it right. But do we understand that that's nevertheless what we are called to do? Are we ready to "act our age?" To act in a way that demonstrates we understand the gospel? If so, then perhaps we are indeed ready to move beyond milk to solid food.

May Jesus feed us what we need to keep growing [*first picture*]. And may we be "infants in Christ" who act our age! Amen.