

We Plant and Water
1Corinthians 3:1-9; Nehemiah 4:1-9

Throughout the season of Epiphany, we've heard and affirmed that the Word-made-flesh is God's own wisdom and power graciously revealed for us. During this Season we have been continually reminded of the ways that God is with us, in all aspects of our lives. Yet often we fail to grasp how profoundly this truth has changed the world, and we still try to make the old ways, prior to Epiphany, work. We get stuck, acting as if God is a far away, call-if-you-need-me, God.

The Corinthians seem to have been stuck in those ways too. In 1:10-17, Paul had begun talking about how the Corinthians were arguing over allegiance to various apostles. Then, before that issue was settled, Paul seemed to forget all about it and to wander off into a discussion about the cross of Christ as the wisdom and power of God.

However, Paul hasn't lost his rhetorical way. Ever since 1:18, Paul has been criticizing the world "out there" for not recognizing God's wisdom. Paul probably has the Corinthians nodding in agreement at this point. He has made a sharp distinction between God's wisdom and the false wisdom of this old, doomed age.

In 2:13, he had mentioned how "we" share spiritual things with spiritual people, and the Corinthians probably thought that they were included in that claim, either on the giving or the receiving end (or both). But Paul begins chapter 3 with an emphatic "I," contrasted with "you." Paul makes clear they aren't spiritual at all, since their behavior is being determined by competition for status and the expected pursuits of society, rather than by the gospel. "Flesh" in this text should not be understood as something internal, private, or hidden. Rather, in this text "flesh" means the basic, standard, normal, and agreed-upon ways that human society functions, the accepted ways of defining and pursuing the good life.

The Corinthians are still "fleshy" because they're acting as though Christ has not changed any of that. They have failed to realize how the gospel of the cross has brought a new creation. They are still acting as though the pursuits and the goals that the world promotes are what determines and defines the church. They are, Paul says, acting like little children.

Of course, we recognize something of ourselves in these Corinthian ways. Congregations can become divided and distracted by old allegiances to former leaders and to former ways of doing things, and by old hurts and old fights. We so easily think that those are the things that define us. We, the church, too often adopt the culture's claims about what ought to be valued and pursued as the center of our identity: nationalism, power over others, prosperity, and some safe distance from those who would make that prosperity uncomfortable. We, like the Corinthians, often resist being shaped by the wisdom of the cross.

Paul's solution to this is a God-centered view of the church's leaders and of the church's own identity. In verse 6, putting the Corinthians' bickering over apostles into proper perspective, Paul says that he planted a seed, and Apollos watered it. Simply put, we are charged by God

to sow the seed, to plant and to nurture the seed of faith, but it is God who grows that seed to maturity.

In declaring that God “was giving the growth,” Paul uses an imperfect tense verb, a form that stresses God’s ongoing, continual action. The labor of Paul or of Apollos would have been fruitless if God had not been at work all along. This is the bedrock conviction of any ministry, whether that is ministry carried out by the designated leaders of the church, or by individual members of the church in their own particular vocations, or by the church as a whole: we can engage in ministry only in the trust that God is going to be at work, in and through what we do, to bring the growth that God wants. If the work in which we are engaged is built on some other conviction, it isn’t really ministry of the gospel at all, but is focused somewhere else and with other goals in mind.

You see, perhaps we all need a reminder, whether we spend worship time in the pulpit or in the pew, that neither the congregation nor the ministry belongs to us. The church does not belong to culture or the market place. It doesn’t even belong to particular theologians or particular denominational confessions. The church belongs to God. The church is called to see, in and through (and sometimes despite) the workers in the church, that God is the one who is bringing growth, maturity, and the full flowering of the seed that has been planted through the preaching and the living of the gospel.

When Igor Sikorsky was 12, his parents told him that competent authorities had already proved human flight impossible. He went on to build the first helicopter. In his American plant, he posted this sign: “According to recognized aero-technical tests, the bumblebee cannot fly because of the shape and weight of his body in relation to the total wing area. The bumblebee does not know this, so he goes ahead and flies anyway” (*Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, by Paul Lee Tan [Assurance Publishers], p. 945).

Nehemiah would have loved that sign! His story shows that whenever you try to accomplish anything significant for the Lord, you will face strong opposition. Satan never bothers with half-hearted people who are content with a ho-hum spiritual existence. But if you are on fire for Christ, look out! The name “Satan” means “adversary”; he is committed to opposing God and His people, especially when they are zealous to exalt God’s glory.

Nehemiah was certain of the mission that God had for him and he continually, through prayer and meditation, remained focused on that goal. He did not allow the things of the surrounding society and culture to alter his faithfulness to God’s direction. Nehemiah did not allow the negative voices, the doubts of others, the threats of harm, or the voices of ridicule to deter him.

Have no doubt, when you focus on doing the will of God, and remove yourself from the temptations of the culture around you, there will be opposition! This also applies to churches and church leaders: Whenever godly leaders attempt to rally God’s people to advance His kingdom, opposition will hit. We need to be ready for such opposition and know how to respond to it. Nehemiah 4 teaches us that ...*When the enemy opposes us, as he surely will, we should respond with prayer, work, vigilance, and focus on the Lord.*

If we only had chapter 3, we would get the impression that the work on the wall went without a snag. “So-and-so built this gate, and these people built the wall to this point and next to them, these people built the wall further, etc.” It sounds as if there were no problems. But such was not the case. It never is.

We are being called to plant seeds of faith and spirituality and to water that seed. There will be struggles. So of the opposition will come from within this room. However, through prayer, meditation, and maintaining our focus upon Our Lord, we will be empowered and the seed will mature and grow. That part is not up to us. We have our instructions...planting season!