

Children of Flesh and Spirit: '1 Corinthians 2 and 3

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The compulsion to define things, ideas, identities, even ourselves oppositionally, against something else is a powerful and pervasive psychological reflex. As black is to white, as off is to on, as hot is to cold, as right is to wrong (and isn't that a favourite among us?) and so often in relation to life in Christ, as flesh is (antithetically) to Spirit.

But we are also taken by the ideas of 'both, and' not either/or.

'Black and White' thinking, we soon recognise is clunky and forces distinctions that do not reflect our lived experience. We yearn for a more nuanced recognition of variations and shades. Qualitative evaluations are important, along with quantitative.

Paul is a nimble and nuanced thinker. We become breathless trying to keep up with his darting and swerving and leaping agile logic.

Before we attempt to run his gauntlet we are wise to do a few stretches, and limber ourselves up, readying ourselves for the twists and turns and the cracking pace he will set.

In this paper, we are going to run the first leg of 1 Corinthians – chapters 1-3. We are particularly watching for the way Paul will take the corner from chapter 2 into chapter 3 – from language of the ψυχικὸς – σαρκίνοις;- πνευματικοῖς into a metaphor embracing the image of infants, babies, feeding on milk.

“ And so Brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for Solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you , are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, 'I belong to Paul' and another 'I belong to Apollos', are you not merely human. “

Sometimes we find it impossible to keep abreast with Paul, and so we tail a commentator who tails Paul. A commentator makes it easier to keep up from a little distance behind, but in doing so, we do not feel the turns as sharply.

I wish to highlight some aspects of translation and interpretation and the way these make the text an easier run for us, but which ultimately mean that we have not actually run the same course as Paul. To demonstrate this we will follow the coaching of one particular commentator, CK Barrett. Barrett represents solid, established scholarship, written in reference to a range of other thinkers. His reading of Paul is mainstream and while making a contribution to the conversation, resembles, in this part, the general consensus of views.

Let's listen to Barrett's explanation of Paul's use of these terms -

There is a Christian wisdom, and there is a difference between infant and mature, natural and spiritual, Christians.¹

And so his translation of 1 Corinthians 2:6 -

We do however speak wisdom among mature Christians (teleioi)

Immediately we are stuck by his 'Christian' language – nomenclature that is completely outside Paul or the Corinthian community's experience. So let us hear Barrett further as he develops a theology of the relationship between these key terms.

Christian wisdom ... is given at the disposition of the Spirit. The gift is however one for the *mature Christian*. For this word in Paul (as applied to men) see xiv.20; phil iii.15; col 1. 28; iv. 12. It is not common in the Greek Old Testament, but its use there suggests ethical perfection (eg Wisdom ix. 6; Sirach xlv. 17); elsewhere it is generally used of those who are full-grown, adult. The sense here is given by ii. 12, iii. 1; compare also the spiritual man of ii.15. By their behaviour the Corinthians Christians show themselves, in general, to be still infants; thus they are not mature, not spiritual and not ready for Christian wisdom. ... The significant point here is that Paul does not have a simple gospel of the cross for Babes (iii.1) and a different wisdom-gospel for the perfect (teleioi). All Christians are potentially perfect or mature in Christ (Col i. 28) though only some are actually what all ought to be.

In taking Barrett as conversation partner, I do so in order to challenge the mainstream reading in a few strategic places.

A common reading of 1 Corinthians chapters 2 and 3, conflates the reference to τέλειοι (2 verse 6) and νήπιοι (3 verse 1) bringing them together as contrasting opposites. Before deciding on an evaluation of νήπιοι (infants) and before importing the qualitative condition of age retrospectively on τέλειοι, we may read Chapter 2 verse 6 remaining open to contextual meanings for τέλειοι, that are not contingent on a contrast with infants.

¹¹ C.K. Barrett, *A commentary of the first Epistle to the Corinthians* (London : Adam & Charles Black, 1968) p.68

The translation of τέλειοι takes two distinctly different forms across the Palline corpus. The semantic domain of τέλειοι encompasses completion, perfection, end goals. But here, as in some other places, when speaking about people, 'mature' is used. This distinction should not go unchallenged. Is Christ's 'power... made perfect in weakness' or made 'mature' (2 Corinthians)? In Romans 12, is the will of God 'good and acceptable and perfect' or 'mature'?

Thus, in 1 Corinthians 2:6, is it among the "perfect" or among the "mature" that wisdom is spoken. I would suggest that the context of looking beyond what has been seen or heard and beyond the dimensions and authorities of this age, suggests that neither 'mature' nor 'perfect' in the qualitative sense is quite right. But – in keeping with the orientation towards 'perfection, completion and end goal' it is among 'those looking to the completion and the perfect' that wisdom can be spoken, recognising that 'wisdom' here refers not to advanced understanding, but the wisdom of the 'crucified Lord of glory'.

The opening chapters of 1 Corinthians are fuelled with impassioned appeals to gain the attention and compliance of the Corinthian community.

While the nomenclature of 'babes/infants' will arise (in chapter 3) in the context of criticism, it is not incumbent on us to interpret the title 'babes/infants' itself as a criticism.

The 'critical' questions reflect grown up anxieties:

Who is wise? Who is 'mature'? Who is Spiritual?

Who is the real leader - Paul or Apollos or Cephas?

Who has the greatest gift - the apostle, prophet or speaker of a mystical tongue?

Who is the trustworthy evangelist – the one who comes with fine words and patrons, or the one who labours and pays their own way?

An undercurrent beneath each of these questions is a defence against those who claim greater wisdom and power, signs and sophistication.

Does the Childhood terminology in these passages function as a chide against or rebuff of the Corinthians? Or, can it be understood not as an entreaty to eschew childishness and pursue another 'higher' maturity, but rather, as an invitation to the Corinthians to view themselves rightly, as loved and sustained, and essentially relational both in correspondence to Paul, and to Christ. The 'νήπιοι' (infant) nomenclature which Paul uses both for himself and for his readers may be offered as a positive reiteration of the inverted kingdom ethic of Love, expressed through the claim, criterion and consequence of the cross of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:17).

A recurring theme throughout these early chapters is the cross of Christ/Christ crucified. These phrases define the apostolic kerygma, embody the wisdom of God and the folly of God, and proclaim reconciliation of divisions of status.

In the cross of Christ we are confronted not by lofty spiritual wisdom, transcendent mysterious utterances or angelic messages. Rather, in the cross of Christ we are confronted by the fleshly, embodied, weak, broken, foolish, captured and enslaved spectacle of the crucified Christ. All that the Corinthians would deride, and claim to have 'risen above', Paul embraces and affirms as the exclusive and distinctive claim of their faith.

As chapter 3 unfolds, we see the pattern of Paul's ministry characterized by pioneering and Apollos' ministry characterized by follow up activity.

Paul plants and lays foundations – Apollos waters and builds. In this context we understand that Paul is accounting for the style and content of his ministry activities – he is an initiator, he gets things going, establishing the early work. Planting and foundation-setting, these are not less honourable or insignificant endeavours. Seeds and foundations are imperative. So too, feeding a nursing infant milk, rather than solids, is not a lesser task. Feeding/nursing is a wise and (if you've ever tried it – with either breast or bottle) challenging, complex and nuanced process. Paul is not scolding the Corinthians for needing milk. There is no better substance for infants. He is defending the purity and substance of his rich, milky ministry of salvation amongst them. If there is a sense of admonition, it is that the Corinthians want something other than what is good and necessary for them, not that milk is no good and they should hurry to get off it.

In most translations, the punctuation of this phrase obscures the clarity of the spirit/flesh antithesis and the distinction of *νήπιος/γάλα* as a metaphor functioning in the same vein as planting and building. Several commentators note the metaphorical nature of *νήπιος*, but interpret it against the sense of the other two metaphors, creating both literary and theological dissonance. Punctuation that follows the units of ideas, leads to reading as follows:

1 Corinthians 3:1,2

IDEA 1: And so, brothers I could not speak to you as spiritual but fleshly.

IDEA 2: As infants in Christ I gave you milk to drink not solid food, for you were not ready

IDEA 3: even now you are not ready for you are fleshly.

The sting for the Corinthians is not that they are being called infants. The middle clause relates to a time of tender and fruitful ministry between Paul and the Corinthians. The rebuke of 'fleshliness' which dominates the Corinthians, sandwiches the recollection of infants being appropriately nourished with good things. The nursing infant latched on to the pure gospel creates an alternate model. While speaking metaphorically, Paul has chosen a very 'fleshly' image to embody spiritual purity. Furthermore, this unity of the fleshly with the spiritual is consistent with the vision of Christ, who is not proclaimed as transcendent and lofty, but as Christ crucified.

As we attend to the language of flesh (σάρξ) and Spirit (πνεῦμα) it is possible that Paul does not cast them as binary opposites as an antithetical pair – as has become a neoclassical convention. Paul addresses a Gentile community, but they are a strongly Roman polis. Paul is a Jewish thinker, with radical openness to Gentiles, but this does not mean he is conventionally Greek in his thinking. Paul's Torah envisioned the unity of love for God finding primary expression in heart, gut, mind and strength.

I propose that in line with this anthropology we allow for Paul to be casting, not an antithetical structure of flesh against spirit, but rather that he is issuing an impassioned call for reintegration of flesh and spirit. That the Corinthians themselves have made this distinction – some claiming to be 'spiritual' and above fleshly concerns as a criterion of superiority. Paul grounds his radical reordering of the community through the confronting enfleshed vision of the crucified Christ. We do well to recognise the utter earthly materiality of this image in the face of Corinthians claims of esoteric 'sophia' (wisdom) and Mysterion (mysteries). Paul counter-intuitively usurps this claim through an offensive, blood and guts and broken flesh Lord.

The image of the infant then, constantly being filled by the nourishing source of milk, functions as a pattern for the intimacy and connection, and the dependence and unity of our incarnate life upon the life giving and energising flow of the Spirit, the essential content of which is not revelations of lofty mysteries, but the irreducibly supreme event in Paul's terms, of the cross of Christ.

The contrast of γάλα and βρῶμα in chapter 3, then is far from a programmatic agenda – in which the Corinthians are being called to 'grow up' and 'move on' from milk (despised) to meat (esteemed). Solid food, is going to emerge as highly problematic.

A significant issue to emerge later in Chapter 8 will feature plenty of 'solid food' (βρῶμα), which was far from being a superior substance to enhance maturity. Evidently the consumption of βρῶμα (as idol food) had been thwarting the unity and humility within the Corinthian community. The matters of food and flesh arise throughout 1 Corinthians; Chapter 3 heralds a premature desire for metaphorical βρῶμα and struggles with the σαρκινός existence. Chapter 8 explores the problems of eating βρῶμα and κρέα in the private and public arenas, Chapter 11 brings to light difficulties for the practices of eating within the ekklesia, and Chapter 12 commandeers not σαρχ but σῶμα body language to provide a model for the community, fulfilled in the resurrection body of Chapter 15.

In light of these references, milk (γάλα) presents as a pure, life giving, suitable nourishment for a community that is in many respects, as we have surveyed, struggling to 'eat well'. In the West, despite our greed and consumption, many of us do not 'eat well' either – in relation to our own bodies, or in relation to our neighbours and environment. The image of milk as a symbol of salvation receded under the rising dominance of the 'economic' images of the cross in enlightenment sensibilities. The recovery of γάλα salvation is once again being championed,² and here finds a healthy embrace in Paul.³ Where Paul offers his teaching and gospel in terms of 'milk' it cannot be seen to be an inferior substance. Paul claims his gospel to be one of power not merely of words. The

² Margaret R. Miles, 'An Image of Salvation: God's Love, Mother milk', *Christian Century* 29 (2008) 22-25; Gail Patterson Corrington, 'The Milk of Salvation: Redemption by the mother in Antiquity and early Christianity.' *Harvard Theological Review* 82 (1989). 393-420

³ While not wishing to over simplify the rich diversity of Pauline scholarship – for the local punter in the pew, in the last century - Paul's gospel has been repeatedly caricatured in economic 'payment/ransom' metaphors. The paucity of Pauline economic language aside, the conflation of this spiritual image with Western materialism makes this framework a problematic one for our faith.

manner in which the Corinthians receive this teaching then, is at worst, as neutral infants, though Paul's passion, loyalty and desire for them suggests that this characterization signifies something (a relationship) much stronger and more intimate than participants in a basic training 'Gospel 101'.

The association of the images of infant (vs. 1), agriculture (vs. 6-9) and building (vs. 10-13), corroborate the communal ethic of the other, leaving no room for individualistic interpretations. Just as it is fields and whole buildings that are established, not individual seeds and bricks, the infant metaphor assumes a context of family and community. The (assumed) antithesis of ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΟΪΣ and ΣΑΡΚΙΝΟΙΣ finds resolution in another direction altogether in Chapter 12. The corporate Σῶμα, rather than σαρχ or πνεῦμα is championed by Paul as the model for Corinthian Christian unity, in which the life of both the spirit and the flesh are positively animated. This is not relative to maturity or to development, but to life and being – as much for the child as for the adult.

Paul has employed the portrait of the infant healthily nourished on the milk of the gospel as a positive program for the Corinthian community: drink deeply of your salvation, suck thirstily on the life-giving power of the cross of Christ. Whether the Corinthians received this as a positive agenda is another question. A sound-byte of Paul's vocabulary of *fool, least, inferior, 'I am nothing'* in contention with the 'Super-Apostles' taken from 2 Corinthians 12:11 reveals that the issues of status were still under contention then. It continues to be an unpopular idea in our times.⁴

⁴ Our Christian book stores are full of 'how to become a better, stronger, more skilled, more spiritual, deeper, more mature Christian in 7 highly effective habits or 12 steps or 40 days of something...' and finely graded Sunday School curricula for every age. I am not criticising these titles as such: their advice is often helpful. It is the genre of self improvement that seems at odds with Paul's expectations of embodied life in the Spirit of the crucified Christ. From Chapter 12 we have seen that the hand serves the mouth, which feeds the stomach, transported by the legs etc. We strengthen and build up not ourselves, but each other.