

## V. Serving, Planting, and Building

October 30/November 1, 2012

1 Corinthians 3:1-17

**Aim:** To understand that God while God uses human servants to minister to the church, it is God who causes it to grow, mature, and be holy; in addition, we are to beware of human servants who minister either ineffectively or destructively.

The first four chapters of 1 Corinthians are devoted to dealing with the divisions that were such a threat to the work of the gospel in Corinth. We have seen Paul's tactic for exposing the first of two foundational mistakes that his opponents and detractors were making. They were in danger of rejecting the gospel of the cross in favor of a human wisdom, which seemed so much more successful, attractive, and in particular, Corinthian. Now Paul turns to their second mistake as he begins to show them how they have misunderstood the unique nature of the church and its leadership. The root of the problem is the same. They are adopting the cultural norms of their own situation in Corinth, and seeking to apply those to the church. Once human wisdom and power have displaced the gospel of 'Jesus Christ and Him crucified' in a church setting, then the spotlight will inevitably fall upon the church leaders. If the message is so unimpressive, then the messengers must compensate for it by their wisdom, spirituality, and charisma. As chapter 3 opens, Paul's tactic is to expose the immaturity and worldliness of such a view. In his arguments, he makes use of three different metaphors: serving a spiritual table, planting a spiritual garden, and building a spiritual temple.

Having insisted that his ministry is Spirit-given both in content and presentation (2:1-16), Paul shows that patronage of others demonstrates superficiality and that it places the church at risk. This is why he projects Apollos and himself as friends and fellow-workers, albeit with different ministries, who should be held in similar esteem (3:1-9). Nevertheless, because Paul and not Apollos has laid the foundation of the church (3:10-11), certain unnamed individuals who bask in the light of their mentors need to be cautious about how they handle apostolic doctrine. He indicates that should those concerned injure the shrine of God, they must give account (3:12-17).

### A. Serving a Spiritual Table (1 Cor. 3:1-5)

First, Paul pictures the minister as a servant in God's family. By picturing himself as a 'table waiter' (*diakonoi* – v. 5) for the Corinthians, Paul describes the service he provided for them.

#### 1. Immature Christians (3:1-2)

*<sup>1</sup>But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup>I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready...*

The opening of the chapter is full of irony. The very people who were setting themselves up as 'spiritual' and elevating the claims of their heroes over against the apostle, were indicating, by this very action, that they were still only 'babies.' Two devastating phrases sum them up. They are 'infants in Christ' (v. 1) and 'still of the flesh' (v. 3).

It is important to recognize that Paul has no doubts as to whether these misguided members of the church in Corinth are in fact true Christian believers. Before Paul chastises them for their immature sinfulness, he reminds them again that he is speaking to them as 'brethren,' as fellow

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believers. He calls them ‘brothers’ and affirms that they are ‘in Christ.’ They are certainly ‘spiritual’ in the technical sense of chapter 2, i.e., they are not any longer the ‘natural’ men that they once were. However, their behavior is totally inconsistent with their new status. Their mistake is to see the gift of the Spirit as leading to an elite status for some within the church, and from this springs all their jealousy and quarreling—the evidence of their worldly condition.

‘Fleshly’ (*sarkinoi*) means that although the Corinthians do not fall precisely into the category of the ‘natural man’ (*psychikos*, 2:14), someone unwilling to receive the things of the Spirit of God, they are ‘infants in Christ,’ unlike the *teleioi*, those ‘mature’ believers referred to in 2:6. Here, ‘infants’ (*nēpios*) implies naivety. They were not babes because they were newly redeemed, but because they were inexcusably immature.

As a table servant, at the beginning of his ministry among them Paul served milk. This was necessary because they were mere babes in Christ (cp. 1 Pe. 2:2). By ‘milk,’ Paul was not indicating that new Christians need different doctrine from the mature Christian. Each needs the same doctrine, but new Christians need it in a simpler form. ‘For the same Christ,’ says Calvin, ‘is milk for babes, and solid food for adults.’ More than enough time had passed for the Corinthians to stop drinking milk and start eating meat. And Paul, as their servant, was prepared to serve them meat, but they were still unable to receive it.

Not only were the unweaned infants, they were still not ready for ‘solid food.’ It is possible, therefore, for real believers to be stunted in their development and for a whole congregation to be affected by this problem.

Paul did not have one program for young converts, holding back higher truths to impart at some later stage to those whom he deemed to have made the grade, and perhaps even more mysterious matters to share with those reckoned to be super-spiritual saints. There was one gospel for all. There is no difference at all between the truths of a spiritual milk diet and a spiritual solid food diet, except in detail and depth. A new Christian might explain the atonement, for example, as ‘Christ died for my sins. A long-time student of the Word, on the other hand, would go into such things as regeneration, justification, substitution, and propitiation. One explanation would not be truer than the other, but the first would be milk and the second, solid food.

In short, this letter disproves the notion of anything resembling a twin-track program. If we were to catalogue all the doctrines that appear in 1 Corinthians, we would end up with something like an index to a systematic theology. All that is meant by the contrast between ‘milk’ and solid ‘food’ is that basic principles, simply expressed, ought in time be given detailed explanation as and when believers are ready to hear.

For a Christian preacher or teacher to give only milk week after week, year after year, is a crime against the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. The appetite must be created. Nothing is more precious or wonderful than a little baby. But a twenty-year-old with the mind of an infant is heartbreaking. A baby who acts like a baby is a joy; but an adult who acts like a baby is a tragedy.

### 2. ‘Merely Human’ Christians (3:3-4)

<sup>3</sup>...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? <sup>4</sup>For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?

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In the spiritual context, we must never remain content with childishness. To be so is, for Paul, synonymous with ‘worldliness’ or (more literally) ‘the flesh.’ It is to drift back to the old way of living, to the world’s outlook and value-systems.

It is fine for babies to be babies, but it is a tragedy for adults to act like babies. And that was what was happening at Corinth. Their division into camps and the jealousy and strife between these camps gave sufficient evidence of their childishness. ‘Jealousy and strife’ are always found in an immature congregation. Jealousy is the attitude, and strife is the action that results from it. One is the inner emotional condition, the other the outward expression of selfishness. Paul says they were ‘carnal’ and ‘behaving like mere men.’ This simply means they were guided by the same principles as unbelievers, rather than being guided by the Spirit of God.

Why does Paul call them ‘babes in Christ’ and ‘fleshly’ people who live according to merely ‘human standards’? Here Paul takes them and us back to the beginning of the letter and his primary concern in writing (cp. 1:10-17). It is their factiousness, their evident ‘jealousy and strife,’ which demonstrates their immaturity. Factionalism based on personal loyalties to particular ministers is all too ‘human,’ says Paul, and a sure sign that they remain ‘babyish’ and of having a ‘fleshly’ nature. How can they be wise when they lead their lives ‘in a human way’ (*kata anthrōpōn*), as those void of any understanding of Christ?

The indisputable evidence of their spiritual immaturity is their elevation of favorite teachers to the position of party leaders, and a consequent lining up behind them as rival parties. The implication is that if the Corinthians are following either Paul or Apollos, they are failing the Lord. That is ‘behaving only in a human way,’ adopting the world’s lifestyle. This jealousy of what others have, and what others can do, automatically leads to rivalry and strife. At such a point, the church becomes indistinguishable from the world.

Paul’s point is that this worldliness illustrates that they have not yet come to grips with the message of the cross. To bow before a crucified Savior is to acknowledge one’s wretchedness and abject need, to cast oneself on the rich mercy of God as a rebellious sinner. It is to recognize that we have nothing to bring before him. Clearly, that spells the end of all human pride and self-seeking, and therefore of jealousy, quarreling, factions, and divisions. So the factions developing in the Corinthian congregation illustrate that they have not yet grasped the need to be crucified with Christ.

### 3. Carnal Christians?

Paul calls them *sarkinoi*, ‘men and women of *flesh*.’ To be sure, they are Christian believers; they are not *psychikoi*, people who belong to this present age and not the next, who are not at all Christians. But neither are they like him, *pneumatikoi*, ‘men and women of the *Spirit*,’ those whom he earlier called mature (2:6).

These verses, along with 2:6-16, with their references to *psychikoi*, *sarkinoi*, and *pneumatikoi*, have been taken to refer to different grades of Christians. This was anything but Paul’s intention. Those he labels *psychikoi* are not Christians at all, but *unbelievers* locked into this present age. For their part, *pneumatikoi* are simply Christians who understand apostolic truth but who behave in a spiritually mature way. The *sarkinoi* are believers who have made little progress in their understanding and need to ‘grow up’ in the Lord by submitting to good teaching and by behaving in a godly way. There is not the slightest hint here that *sarkinoi* become *pneumatikoi* by some

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kind of ‘second’ experience of the Spirit as advocated by various holiness movements throughout Christian history.

Paul’s words have been misconstrued by some to mean that there are three basic groups of people: the unsaved, or the natural man (2:14); the saved, or the spiritual man (2:15); and the carnal man. The latter is supposedly a person who is a believer but lives like an unbeliever. Much harm has been done by this particular teaching. Many are quite happy to occupy the level of this so-called ‘carnal’ Christian. They are content to believe they can live like an unbeliever and still go to heaven when they die. Paul’s point was that the Corinthians were acting carnally at this particular time in their lives. He wasn’t suggesting that carnality was the general tenor of their lives. If we are carnal habitually, it is because we have never been converted.

### 4. Servant Christians (3:5)

<sup>5</sup>*What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.*

Once the cross becomes an unacceptable message, then the focus will be on the present, both for reward and for recognition. And once the focus is on the present, rivalry will inevitably arise between different Christian groups. In verse 5, Paul attacks this wrong thinking by asserting that he and Apollos, and anyone else working in the church, were only ‘servants.’ They are not creators of a new philosophy or lifestyle, but the messengers of a given revelation. Servants must not become masters to worship and to follow; they are the Lord’s agents ‘through whom you have believed.’ Paul might well have added: ‘not *in* whom.’ They were not converted to him or Apollos, or anyone else. A servant simply takes his orders from his master: ‘as the Lord assigned to each.’

The preposition ‘through’ is pointed, given the Corinthians’ preoccupation with personalities. They did not become believers ‘in’ Paul and Apollos, but ‘in’ the Lord Jesus Christ ‘through’ the preaching of these His servants. Notice ‘what?’ rather than ‘who?’. In this way, Paul squashes the notion that either man is an empire builder.

The word ‘servant’ (*diakonos*, ‘deacon’) originally meant someone who served at tables or what we would now call a busboy. It also carried the sense of serving on behalf of a *master*, in his name and under his authority. It is not the same word *doulos* often translated ‘servant, slave, or bond-servant’ (cp. 7:21-23), but simply meant a menial worker of any sort, free or slave. The servant exists to carry out the wishes of the one who exercises authority over him. Let the Corinthians understand that Paul and Apollos are humble ‘servants’ of their Lord ‘through’ whose ‘service’ many in the church became believers.

Paul was saying in effect, ‘No one builds a movement around a waiter or busboy, or erects monuments to them. Apollos and I are just waiters or busboys whom the Lord used as servants to bring you food. You do not please us by trying to honor us. Your honor, your glory, is misplaced. You are acting like the world, like ‘mere men.’ Build your monuments, give your praise to the One who prepared the spiritual food we delivered.’

Having stressed the minister’s inferiority as a servant, Paul now turns to his instrumentality saying they are servants ‘through whom you have believed.’ Paul doesn’t say they are servants *from* whom you believed, as if preachers were the originators or authors of faith. Neither does he say they are servants *in* whom you believed, as if preachers were the objects of faith. That word ‘through,’ then, shows us ministers are instruments or channels for God to do His work.

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Preachers do not provide or apply the gospel, they simply serve as a mouthpiece for it. They are the instruments, not the source, of salvation.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of these men was not due to their innate abilities, which might perhaps have justified a greater recognition of the eloquent Apollos over Paul. On the contrary, it was, literally, ‘to each as the Lord gave.’

The minister, then, is responsible to serve others, but he is not able to make babies into adults overnight, nor is he able to keep adults from acting like babies from time to time. That seems to be the essence of what Paul was saying by using the metaphor of the servant.

### B. Planting a Spiritual Garden (1 Cor. 3:6-9)

Having said these things, the apostle changes metaphors and refers to the minister as a farmer in God’s field. The congregation is ‘God’s paddock’ (*geōrgion* – verse 9) and Paul and Apollos are farm ‘workers.’ Paul concedes gladly that Apollos and he have complemented each other, even as a hired planter and an employee who irrigates are both needful in a field. Some workers are planting while others are watering, but all are engaged in the work of farming. So there is diversity within unity here.

#### 1. The Diversity of the Labor (3:6-7)

<sup>6</sup>*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.* <sup>7</sup>*So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.*

The aorist tense for the first two verbs indicates an action that happened at a point in time, but the tense of the third verb of which God is the subject is an imperfect tense, which refers to a continuing work over a period of time. We might render it, ‘God kept on making the seed grow.’ Paul’s point is that it is God who is doing the real work through His servants, for He is the only one who can give life to the seed. Without that miracle, the planting and watering would be in vain. Although Paul and Apollos have different tasks, they are on an equal footing before their Lord—they are simply servants. The Corinthians’ perspective of them is far too high.

Although Paul is talking about individual human beings, his stress is that they are not in competition with one another as preachers, leaders, or even as Christian servants. They are not rivals, because they are working for the same master and involved in the same grand project. God gives us all different tasks and different opportunities, and we have distinctive gifts and contributions, so that every piece of service matters.

Paul makes three observations about these ‘servants,’ using the analogy of a farm. First, neither the planter nor the waterer is ‘anything’; it is God, not they, who causes the growth. They cannot bestow life. To be sure, they do need to plant and water; their work is needed. But the energy for the germination, growth, and fruition comes from God. No man, not even the best farmer or horticulturist, can give physical life or growth to a plant. How much less can anyone, even an apostle, give spiritual life or growth to a person. The most that men can do in either case is to prepare and water the soil and to plant the seeds. The rest is up to God.

As far as the Bible is concerned, the minister’s job is not to be successful, but to be faithful in spreading the gospel. Some will be more adept at planting while others will be better at watering, but whatever his role, the minister is to be faithful and simply trust God for the results.

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Although God needs no particular individuals to plant and irrigate, no laborer can succeed without Him. The Corinthians should not idolize dispensable servants.

### 2. The Unity of the Labor (3:8a)

<sup>8</sup> *He who plants and he who waters are one...*

Secondly, despite having different functions, the planter and the waterer are ‘one.’ Both are needed and neither can do without the other. Though they have differing roles, it is the ‘one’ operation in which their share. In our eyes, some Christian work is more glamorous, or seems more important or more significant than other work. But if God has called a person to a work, that is the most important ministry he can have. All of God’s work is important. To glorify one kind of Christian work above another is just as carnal and divisive as to glorify one leader over another.

Christians must stop treating their leaders as rulers and see them as workers, following in the footsteps of a crucified Savior. Rightly understood, this principle spells the end of all the competitiveness between Christians. Instead of such divisions, gospel spirituality stresses the essential unity of all service truly offered in Christ and representative of His example.

### 3. The Reward for the Labor (3:8b)

*...and each will receive his wages according to his labor.*

Thirdly, each man will receive from God a reward according to his ‘labor’ (*kopos*, ‘grinding toil’). Paul teaches that a contrast should not be drawn between the usefulness of men with different gifts and offices but who work equally hard. God rewards on the basis of labor, not success or results. Thank God it is our labor, not the results of it, that forms the basis for reward. There are differing rewards, depending on His servants’ faithfulness and application, what the Bible calls ‘stewardship.’ But – and this is critical for the Corinthians to grasp – it is the Lord and not they who rewards the laborer. Paul and Apollos are stewards of the Lord, and accountable to Him, not to the Corinthians (see 4:1-5).

Paul’s focus is on the future reward. He sees mature spirituality in terms of responding to the grace of God in the gospel by serving in God’s field or on His building site.

### 4. The Community of Laborers (3:9)

<sup>9</sup> *For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.*

The emphasis here is on laboring together, not alongside God, who is the supreme Lord and Master, but alongside one another. God is the owner; we are the work-force. But the church itself is the field that God owns and in which He sets His laborers to work. *Georgion*, ‘field’, means cultivated land rather than a meadow left to grass. This metaphor is designed to show how foolish it is to exalt one preacher over another. The proper way to honor ministers is to look to the God who sent them.

This verse summarizes the thrust of the paragraph. We *all* belong *only* to God. Leaders do not own the church, whether it is local, national, or universal. Nor do the members own the church. We are *God’s* field and *God’s* building. He produces the crop. He raises the edifice. He selects the laborers and He allots the tasks. He will reward the faithful.

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### C. Building a Spiritual Temple (1 Cor. 3:10-17)

In the previous sentence, Paul shifts the imagery of the congregation from ‘farm’ to ‘building.’ Paul wants to move on, using a third metaphor to speak about the church as a specific kind of building, that is, a ‘holy temple’ or shrine (v. 17) being erected by local men upon Paul’s foundation. The sequence of pronouns – ‘another’ and ‘each person’ (3:10), ‘no one’ (3:11), ‘anyone’ (3:12), ‘each person’s’ and ‘each man’s’ (3:13), and ‘somebody’s’ (3:14, 15) – shows that Paul is anxious because the leadership is at fault.

While this passage contains teachings that are applicable to individual Christians, it must be noted that their primary application is to the gospel minister and the way in which he goes about his ministry. This paragraph is not primarily about building our own spiritual lives, but about building the church. All of the uses of the pronoun ‘you’ are plural and the application is therefore corporate. When we get to verse 17, we shall see that building is identified as ‘God’s Temple.’

#### 1. The Foundation (3:10-11)

##### a) *The Foundation Layer (3:10)*

<sup>10</sup>*According to the grace of God given to me, 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.*

Once again Paul is reminding them of his own initial ministry at Corinth in order to underline the principles on which he acted and to illustrate that he had not shifted from them. His role then was to lay the foundation, and others, including the current leaders in the church, were now building upon it. The metaphor is well chosen because building, especially the building of a temple, is a long, slow process, costly in man-hours, energy, and finance. One generation might lay the foundation, the second might build upon it, and a third complete it, as with many medieval cathedrals.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of the incontrovertible fact that *he* laid the foundation at Corinth. It was not Apollos, nor Cephas, nor some ‘wise’ teacher who has arisen in the meantime, but Paul who first came and preached the gospel in the Achaian capital. Here he makes two sharply pointed remarks directed at the Corinthians. First, he did so ‘by the grace of God which was given to him,’ God’s unique ‘gift’ to him as an apostle and church-planter. The foundation-laying for the church at Corinth was no merely human act of Paul’s that could give rise to a pro-Paul faction in the church. It was God’s work done ‘through’ him by the ‘gift’ of the Spirit. Secondly, Paul laid this foundation as, literally, ‘a wise architect’ (*architektōn* – the word literally means ‘chief builder’). The word *architektōn*, from which we get ‘architect,’ carried in Paul’s day the idea of builder as well as designer. He was a combination architect and general contractor, a senior director of works rather than an overlord. In that he is a ‘wise’ (*sophos*) director, the apostle contrasts himself with those in the church who consider that they are wise.

That Paul was a good, wise builder was God’s doing, not his own. ‘Wise’ (*sophos*) in this context has to do not only with spiritual wisdom but also with practical wisdom, with skill. Paul knew why he had been sent to Corinth. He was sent to build the foundation of the church there, and that is what he carefully and skillfully did.

Paul now adds, ominously and mysteriously, ‘another is building on’ his foundation. Paul says no more and gives no name. But it must have been abundantly obvious to the congregation who

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this unnamed ‘builder’ is. It was likely one of the teachers of ‘wisdom’ with whom Paul has been interacting for the greater part of the letter to this point. So Paul gives this warning, ‘Let each one be careful how he builds.’

### b) *The Foundation Laid (3:11)*

<sup>11</sup>*For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

What is necessary for a minister to do a good job of building? First he must build on the foundation. Those who deal with this passage quite often slip into saying the minister must build on the right foundation, as if there were several from which to choose. But Paul says no such thing. The fact is, there is only one foundation and that is Jesus Christ. The choice for the minister then, is not between several foundations but between the only foundation and no foundation at all.

Christ crucified and exalted, the true *sophia*, has been set in position by Paul as the only basis upon which the Corinthians can build successful. ‘Laid’ in place translates *keimenon*, meaning to be situated.

We all know what would happen if we were to build a house without any kind of foundation. So it is with the ministry that is not built on Christ. It will not be very sturdy and will collapse somewhere along the line. If it doesn’t collapse here, it will in eternity.

Paul’s primary concern is that their discontent might lead them to imagining that they can build something different from that which the foundation dictates. His stress in verse 11 is that if the Corinthians were going to build a church, then there could only be one true foundation, and he had already laid that in the gospel of Christ crucified. That foundation determined the shape of the whole superstructure. If the church was to be Christlike, it had to be built on Christ alone. There can be no Christianity without Christ. You cannot have Christian ethics without Christ. You cannot have a meeting place between God and man (the purpose of the temple) without the cross of Christ.

Let the one who currently teaches in the church take great care how he builds, ‘for’ no other foundation is able to be laid. This suggests that this person or persons, by teaching something different, is actually laying *another* foundation. But there is only one foundation that is able to be laid for this or any other church, ‘Jesus Christ,’ that is, Jesus Christ *crucified*.

Paul’s fear is that they will subtly change the foundation, thinking that they are not replacing Christ but supplementing Him with a fuller and richer spirituality. If that happens, then the end product will not be a Christian church. The sufficiency of the gospel of Christ is the issue that is at stake here, and Paul is again fighting against the Corinthian view that the apostolic gospel is somehow inadequate and needs to be supplemented with a form of supernatural triumphalism.

Some builders have tried to make the foundation of Christianity to be church tradition, others the moral teachings of the human Jesus, others ethical humanism, and still others some form of pseudo-scientism or simply sentimental love and good works. But the only foundation of the church and of Christian living is Jesus Christ. Without that foundation no spiritual building will be of God or will stand. Every human philosophy, religious system, and code of ethics is doomed to failure and destruction, because it has no foundation. There is only one foundation: Jesus Christ.

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Wisdom, power, and spiritual gifts are *not* the foundation of the New Testament church. The true foundation is ‘Jesus Christ and Him crucified.’ We need to regain that understanding as the fundamental, non-negotiable reality of church life and growth.

### 2. The Materials (3:12)

<sup>12</sup> *Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—*

Paul, in some trepidation, introduces a subordinate metaphor. He has accepted that some Corinthians might, indeed, build upon his doctrinal foundation. Yet with what consequences? The issue is that of durability: precious metals and hewn stone may endure for centuries, whereas shacks made of stubble or reed are unable to resist a storm. Attractiveness, or the lack of it, is not the primary factor: what counts is the potential of a construction to survive the ravages of time. By ‘wood, hay, straw’ Paul doubtless means ‘the wisdom of the world’ (3:19) because it passes away.

The wise builder not only lays the right foundation, he also builds with quality materials, and he does so realizing that his work will be tested in the future. Any normal human builder would want to use the very best materials for the noble purpose of the construction of a meeting place between God and man. He divides the materials into two kinds: the valuable, lasting materials – gold, silver, and precious stones; and the worthless, perishable materials – wood, hay, and stubble. We understand, of course, that Paul is using these materials in a representative or symbolical way. He is not suggesting we build our church buildings out of gold, silver, and precious stones! He is thinking about how the church is built in a spiritual sense. Paul is not giving an allegory of materials that make for a beautiful church, spiritually understood. Rather, he is saying that inferior or unfaithful teaching will not survive the fires of God’s judgment, but that strong and faithful teaching will.

The building materials represent the teachings or doctrines of the minister. The Word of God is the primary component in the work of the minister – it is the gold, silver, and precious stones – the only thing that will endure.

The building materials are in two categories, each listed in descending order of value. The first category clearly represents high-quality materials. The second, just as clearly, represents inferior materials. The materials do not represent wealth, talents, or opportunity. Nor do they represent spiritual gifts. The materials represent believers’ responses to what they have—how well they serve the Lord with what He has given them. In other words, they represent our works. Works are not the source of the Christian life, but they are the marks of it.

The root of the problem at Corinth was that the people in the church had mixed teachings from the various schools of the philosophers with the gospel – they had built with wood, hay, and straw. They hadn’t denied the gospel, but they certainly had diluted it. Paul’s desire was to help them see what had already happened and to put them on their guard against any preachers who would serve up a diluted gospel in the future.

Do we have any preachers building with wood, hay, and stubble? Are today’s preachers prone to dilute the gospel with human wisdom? Don’t many preachers downplay themes like the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man and dwell instead on how to cope with life’s minor aggravations and irritations? Isn’t it true that many preachers cultivate a style that is more like a comedy act than the preaching of the gospel? The problem is not that these teachers do not believe in the gospel, but rather that they consider the gospel to need help in reaching

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sophisticated people. They don't understand Paul's assertion that the gospel is 'the power of God to salvation' (Rom. 1:16).

### 3. The Test (3:13-15)

<sup>13</sup>*each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. <sup>14</sup>If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup>If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*

The big question is not whether it looks impressive now, but whether it will last the test of time and especially the test, or the day, of God's judgment. The fire will test the quality of each man's work and then the materials that have been used will be revealed for what they are. Only that teaching which is centered in and true to Jesus crucified and risen will stand the test of the fires of God's judgment on the Last Day.

Paul is referring to the day when all Christians must stand before the Lord to give account of themselves. On that day, the minister who has built well will receive a reward. The greatest of all possible rewards is simply to hear the Savior say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant' (Mt. 25:21). On the other hand, those who have preached defective doctrines will 'suffer loss,' that is, they will lose any reward for their ministry, but they themselves will be 'saved...through fire.' The picture here is of a minister who, trapped in a burning house which he constructed with his own hands, beats his way through a curtain of flame and then escapes. He leaves all behind him as a smoldering heap. Although our salvation is sure, as Christians we are accountable. In glory, the saints will enjoy varying degrees of blessedness, depending upon the caliber of our stewardship in this world.

Fire is a symbol of testing (cp. Job 23:10; Zech. 13:9; 1 Pe. 1:17; Rev. 3:18). This will not be a time of punishment but a time of reward. Even the one who has built with wood, hay, or straw will not be condemned; but his reward will respond to the quality of his building materials. Two types of workmen correspond to the two categories of materials: the valuable and the useless, the constructive and the worthless. Believers who have the right motives, proper conduct, and effective service build with gold, silver, and precious stones. They do constructive work for the Lord and will receive corresponding rewards. The Lord's rewards for all his faithful followers are varied and wonderful, and all of them are imperishable (cp. 9:25). The New Testament refers to them as crowns (cp. 2 Tim. 4:7-8; 1 Th. 2:19-20; 1 Pe. 5:4; James 1:12). Worthless workmen, who built with wood, hay, and straw, will not lose their salvation, but they will lose a portion of any reward they might be expecting. In the day of rewards, the useless and evil things will be burned away, but salvation will not be forfeited.

This is not a judgment about the eternal salvation of the builder, and there is certainly nothing here that remotely points to the idea of purgatory. That is an idea totally without biblical warrant. In fact, verse 15 makes it abundantly clear that the builder with hay or straw will himself be saved, even though his life's work may go up in flames. Their 'loss' will not be their salvation, which is not dependent on the work of their ministry; rather it will be the loss of warm commendation from Jesus and the loss of a life's work in ministry, because it has been defective in truth. This man will be saved, says Paul, 'but only as one escaping through the flames.' This is a metaphor, probably based on Amos 4:11 ('a firebrand plucked from the burning'). The man will escape the flames of hell, but he will have all eternity to regret what his ministry *might* have been had he been faithful to the gospel.

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This teaching has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. The fire anticipated by Paul is to break out at the day of evaluation, a day when glory lies ahead for believers, not excluding those who will be judged as relative disappointments. The metaphor concerns the approval or disapproval of Christ *within* paradise.

Applying this to the Corinthians' situation, Paul's meaning is that the fundamental weaknesses of the church may cause it to be built in a way that will not last. They were looking for a perfect church that would make an impression on the glitzy culture of Corinth, and would seem to reflect the values of the community in which they lived. Paul wants to sober them into recognizing that actually they need to be building a church that will stand on the Day of Judgment and that the victory of the church will be experienced in the eternal perspective, and not necessarily in the context of its present work and ministry. The more they relied on the wisdom of the world with its impressive rhetoric and powerful leaders, the more they sought displays of supernatural powers, all the more would they be building with that which was perishable.

### 4. The Temple (3:16-17)

The danger of destructive ministers is forcefully brought before us in verses 16-17. It is easy to read through these two verses with the idea that Paul is still talking about ministers building defectively, but close examination reveals that he isn't. When the day of accounting comes, defective builders will suffer loss but will themselves be saved (3:15). The destructive ministers, on the other hand, will be destroyed (3:17).

#### a) *Defining the Temple (3:16, 17b)*

<sup>16</sup> *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?...For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

In verse 16, Paul uses a phrase to which he will return ten times in the course of the letter – ‘Do you not know?’ He uses this phrase to shock his readers out of their complacency. Paul reminds us that the purpose of the temple in the Old Testament was to be the meeting place between God and His people. God's temple is His dwelling place, inhabited by His Spirit. In 6:19, Paul refers the imagery of the temple to the individual believer. However, here in this section the application is plural and corporate. It is to the whole church at Corinth, not just a special group, or an inner ring, that the apostle is referring.

The congregation is not the outer part of the temple but the inner sanctum or shrine (*naos*), the holiest place of all. The idea that a group of *people* should be thought of as such a ‘temple’ is striking, historically speaking. People tend to see religious *buildings* as holy places. But this group of people did not even have their own separate building at this point in history. How can these *people* be the temple of God? It is because they are indwelt individually (6:19), and therefore corporately, by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit of God makes them the holy *people* of God. He reminds the Corinthians that the Spirit has been pleased to indwell them in order to confirm their standing, God Himself thereby denying the validity of all other faiths.

What makes the Corinthian congregation a temple, or an inner shrine, of God, was the glory of God dwelling in His people by the Holy Spirit. That is what makes the church *holy*, set apart as God's special possession. It is the one place where God can be met in Corinth, in the fellowship of His people. This is why the health and effectiveness of the church was so important. It is God's demonstration, in time, of the transforming power of the cross and the resurrection. His

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alternative society is designed to make the world hungry in its empty frustration of life without God.

### *b) Destroying the Temple (3:17a)*

<sup>17</sup>*If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.*

Paul also uses the metaphor of the temple as the people of God in 2 Corinthians 6:16. In 2 Corinthians, the issue is holiness. God is calling for the separation of ‘the temple of God’ from ‘idols.’ Holiness would be destroyed by association with unholy religion, with its accompanying sexual practices. In the First Letter the emphasis is also on holiness, but a holiness that would be destroyed by the *disunity* of the people in the church. Paul is returning to the vexed matter of factionalism in the church associated with personality cults focused on individual ministers. God intends His gathered church to be united in Christ. A dire warning is directed to those who willfully and willingly destroy God’s sacred shrine by their divisions.

This tactic is meant to impress on them the seriousness of the work to which Paul and they remain jointly committed. He asserts that although their city is thoroughly idolatrous, within its boundaries there is a true shrine for the one God: the church. It follows that if anyone – probably a reference to the purveyors of Greek *sophia* – harms this shrine, its divine occupant will react.

Those who prided themselves on their super-spirituality may well have thought about themselves in this way, but that is why the disastrous divisions have appeared. It is therefore probably true that Paul is thinking about them when he contemplates the possibility of the church being destroyed. He may well mean that internal wrangling was in danger of tearing out the very heart of the church. Or, as some others have suggested, the reference may be to the church’s inability to function any longer as a viable alternative to the pagan culture of Corinth, if it was so infected by Corinthian thinking and ways. Either way, those who were called to be church builders, might turn into reckless destroyers.

Privilege is accompanied by peril. The Greek verb behind ‘ruin’ (*phtheirō*) means to ‘corrupt.’ Consistently with 3:15, what Paul asserts is that if local leaders attempt to build up their church, God’s shrine, with materials supplied by their culture rather than by Him, they must be disabled. In verses 13 to 15, Paul has talked about two types of workmen: constructive workmen and worthless workmen. Both of these groups are composed of believers. But in verses 16-17, Paul talks about a third group of workmen who are obviously made up of unbelievers, because God will never destroy those He has redeemed and given eternal life.

To move away from the radical gospel to a culture that is a pale shadow of paganism is a tragedy of the first degree. Indeed, Paul wants to label it sabotage, or even suicide. No one will be rescued on the Last Day by a spirituality that has taken its color from the surrounding culture. When that happens, a local congregation always degenerates into a religious club in one generation, and a ruined, destroyed building in the next. There are many ways of destroying a local church. Factionalism; empire building; adding to Scripture; all these can achieve the same destructive end, but the chilling note at the end of verse 17 reminds us that this is not a matter of insignificance or neutrality with God. It is sobering to think that a ministry can be enthusiastic and sincere, but ultimately destructive and destroyed.

The sad truth is that the church has always been afflicted with ministers who do not build anything at all, but simply wait for others to build so they can move in and tear down. How do these preachers go about their destructive work? They deny the central truths of the gospel,

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those truths which God has promised to use to build up the church. The sinfulness of man, the holiness of God, the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross, the absolute necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men, the changed conduct of those who receive Christ – these are the truths God Himself has revealed and blessed down through the years.

The teacher who has built badly may barely escape the flames of God's judgment. Not so the divider of the Lord's people in His holy assembly. Paul's words are the severest warning to us, telling how much God's church means to Him.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5.