

Parson to Person
1 Corinthians 3
(The Ministry of the Flesh)

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I *am* of Apollos,’ are you not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who *is* Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, *you are* God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which *temple* you are.

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, '*He catches the wise in their own craftiness*'; and again, '*The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.*' Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. And you *are* Christ's, and Christ *is* God's" (1 Corinthians 3:1–23 NKJV).

Lack of Maturity—Division in the Church

The distinction between the milk and the meat of the word is the knowing and the doing. Milk is knowing—meat is doing!

Continuing his theme on the Corinthian carnality, Paul further addressed unity in the Church. Division must occur as the result of doctrine heresy (2 John 10, Galatians 1) and evil practice (1 Corinthians 5), but conflict over matters of conscience (Romans 13), personality, communications, selfishness, pride, unforgiveness, etc., is intolerable. Unresolved conflict in the Church dishonors the work of God. All believers are called to bring healing and reconciliation.

The Nature of the Cross

The “*message of the cross*” (1:18) demands a recognition of “the nature of the cross”: death. It was the method of Jesus’ death—and is by association designed to produce typified (or literal) death in the disciples of Jesus. We are called to “*deny [ourselves], and take up [our] cross, and follow [Jesus]*” (Matthew 16:24). Therefore, a maturing believer must die to self, follow Jesus, and live in self-sacrificial and others-centered love—and service.

The believers in Corinth, having allowed division and sectarianism, indicated a lack of self-sacrifice and thus immaturity. Their error is a lesson to all of us!

When a believer allows unresolved conflict to go unaddressed, he or she “*falls short*” (Romans 3:23). Therefore, we must “*dwell in peace*” (Romans 12:14–21) with members of the Christian family—putting aside differences for the sake of the call and health of the Body. If your brother or sister offends you, or if you have offended another, go to them and make every effort to correct what is wrong (see Matthew 5:23, Matthew 18:15, and Luke 17:3).

The Work of the Ministry

It is apparent that there were persons in the city of Corinth who were carnally motivated in “ministry.” Sadly, this continues today! The sectarianism in Corinth was apparently encouraged by local leaders who were “building” from the flesh and therefore bringing detrimental attributes into the Church. This needed to stop!

Some men seek occupational ministry in order to achieve popularity, financial gain, wield power, etc. Moreover, both Jesus and Paul said that there would be wolves in sheep's clothing sent in or rise up among us who will be used for satanic purposes (see Matthew 7:15, Acts 20:29–30). Therefore, the wolves or otherwise sinning believers in Corinth needed correction and repentance. A turn from the carnal to the spiritual.

The Propensities of the Flesh

The subtleties of the flesh can sneak in among the best servants, and therefore believers must be aware of human ambition. For this reason, Paul commanded that the *“building”* (vs. 9) be built with the lasting materials of *“gold, silver, and precious stones”* (vs. 12), rather than with the temporal and/or carnal *“wood, hay, [or] straw”* (vs. 12). Those who serve from fleshly motivations (or worse) will see their *“work”* (vss. 13–15) burn on *“the Day”* (vs. 13) when the hidden *“will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work”* (vs. 13).

The Day of the Lord—A Revelation of Good and Evil

Paul's use of *“the Day”* refers to the eschaton: the climactic end times. The expression *“the Day”* is not a specific 24-hour day as one might suggest. It is *“the Day”* of the Lord's glorification in wrath, reign, and final judgment. Therefore, we know that *“the Day of the Lord”* (referenced throughout the Scriptures) will span the Tribulation, the Millennial Reign of Christ, and the Great White Throne Judgment.

Many dispensationalists associate Paul's use of "*the Day*" herein with "*the Judgment Seat of Christ*" (Romans 14:10, 2 Corinthians 5:10) and place it in the eschaton occurring just after the Rapture—for Church Age believers alone. However, I would suggest this event may occur at the climax of the temporal—when "*the elements melt with a fervent heat*" and only the glorious eternal remains (see 2 Peter 3:10–13).

Sectarian Exclusivity—Unity versus Uniformity

There is good reason for believers to strive for unity in the church, but this unity does not always result in uniformity. Some churches give special attention to basic instructional teaching and others give greater focus to a maturing congregational need. However, there need be no criticism of one for the other. Believers who are judgmental and destructive toward other members of God's family (*field, building, temple*) resist the work of God and must stop—or suffer demise (vs. 16).

The Work of God

The ministry belongs to God. "[*He*] gives the increase" (vs. 7). Paul planted and Apollos watered, but their labors did not originate from the flesh. Their service to the Lord was anticipated as lasting and praiseworthy—rightly belonging in praise to Him. Man-motivated/man-centric work will "*burn.*" It is likened to "*wood, hay, and straw.*" The work of God is "*gold*": lasting and eternal. The work of God is "*silver*": righteous. The work of God is as "*precious stones*" fashioned by the Lord. All lasting ministry is the work of God *in and through* the believer—not the work of the flesh. Biblical ministry is not our work in the Lord—it is His ministry through us.

The Enemies of the Cross—Defiling the Temple God is Building

Those who were “building” from the flesh were indeed enemies of the cross. They were tearing away at the work of God, defiling the “*temple*” God is building: the Church. They were setting themselves up for destruction—a work God has accomplished (and continues) in order to stop carnal efforts and shame the fleshly. Knowing this, Paul leveled a stern command: cease and desist human effort and come into line with the work of God.

Rewards

There is little doubt that future rewards will be granted to every believer. However, one is hard pressed to fully understand the exact nature of the rewards promised. It is clear that the works of the flesh will be “burned” and that the eternal work of God (designed to bring Him glory) will be lasting and enjoyed. *“Therefore, let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s”* (vss. 21–23).

I love you all,
Pastor Paul