

1 Corinthians 3 • One Work, Many Servants

Introduction

The church seems to go through various “phases” historically in terms of how it recognizes and deals with its leaders. Not long ago, a single pastor or ministry director might have been revered to the point of idolatry, being assigned the absolute control and accountability over the entire congregation or ministry; today the pendulum seems to have swung in the other direction and we have the veneration of “specialists”, people assigned in the character of a consultant to whom is attributed a narrow band of expertise, be it music, discernment, or what have you. Much of this is the result of seminaries whose curriculum teaches how to run a church more like a retail business rather than according to the wealth of information and standards provided in God’s Word. This chapter actually dovetails with the following one to describe not just the defining biblical characteristics of a true Christian leader, but how every member of the Church individually is to contribute to the whole growth and health of the entire Body of Christ.

¹And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. ²I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, ³for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? ⁴For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men?

⁵What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.

[Read v.1-5]

Q: Although we know that Paul and Apollos possessed the office and role of apostle, what job description does Paul instead use to describe them in v.5?

A: “Servants”.

Q: What does the term “servants” actually describe?

A: The underlying Greek word is “*daikonai*” which is sometimes translated as “deacons”, and ordinarily describes the working laity of the Church. In other words, he is not describing them as the “bosses”, but co-workers on an equal level.

And He said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called ‘Benefactors.’ But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. — Luke 22:25–26

Q: How would you describe the Corinthians’ main problem?

A: They were immature in their spiritual character.

Q: How does Paul specifically define their immaturity?

1. “...still fleshly...” (v.3)
2. “...there is jealousy...” (v.3)
3. “...and strife among you...” (v.3)
4. “...walking like mere men” (v.3)

Q: What do all of these behavioral traits have in common?

A: They all have to do with their mistreatment of each other.

Point: Spiritual maturity (or immaturity) is measured by the quality of our personal relationships.

Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. — Hebrews 5:11–14

Application: *Spiritual leaders are not dictators, but servants whose goal is producing spiritual maturity, defined biblically as quality relationships.*

⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. ⁷So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. ⁸Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. ⁹For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

[Read v.6-9]

Q: How has Paul's imagery changed?

A: Whereas previously he addressed them in general as a kind of family—children whose care is entrusted to the Master's servant, here he portrays them as a field—a crop tended by various different workers for each phase of their development.

Q: What issue does Paul seem to be dealing with here?

A: Their understanding of the spiritual growth process for obtaining maturity is hampered by not understanding that a variety of gifts and offices are active in the Body of Christ to bring the whole work of discipleship to completion.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. — 1 Corinthians 12:4–7

Observation: *Sometimes an individual or even entire program or congregation operates in the character of a "self-eating watermelon"—it plants itself, waters itself, grows itself, harvests itself, and then conveniently eats itself, all without need of any intervention or assistance!*

Q: What is Paul's point about receiving one's own reward in relation to this discussion?

A: No single person, not even apostles like Paul and Apollos, are ever intended to be the sole proprietors or overseers of a congregation or ministry. They are part of a team contribution who is ultimately held accountable and rewarded by God for their role in concert with others—not called to operate independently and over everyone else.

Q: What are all the roles needed to operate a successful farm? How does this relate back to the operation of the Body of Christ?

A: [Open for group discussion.]

Application: *Spiritual leaders are not specialists independent from everyone else, but co-laborers with skills that can only be fully realized as part of the whole team.*

¹⁰According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. ¹¹For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the

[Read v.10-17]

Q: How does Paul's imagery change yet again?

A: It progresses from harvesting a field to building a foundation for the temple of God.

Q: To whom is Paul's teaching being directed?

A: His opening point in v.1-5 was directed at the whole church, as was his second point if v.6-9 about their collectively being a field. Paul continues to address the church corporately as the temple of God.

quality of each man's work. ¹⁴If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

¹⁶Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

Q: Why is it important to make this distinction as to whom Paul is addressing?

A: Although there may be aspects of these things which may be applied to us individually, what this is addressing in its original context is our collective work to build up the Body of Christ. What is being described are the contributions to the edification of the entire Church, not simply our role or rewards as an individual workman going through life independent of it.

Q: So what is this first and foremost attempting to describe?

A: That the only proper foundation for a church is Jesus Christ (v.12) as established by the Gospel, and that each person who comes along to build upon that foundation is to use the very best materials possible.

Q: What do you think might be the biblical definitions of the materials mentioned: "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw"?

A: [Open for group discussion.] [Hint: Galatians 5, and its list of fruits of the flesh vs. the Spirit is great place for discussion.]

Q: What are the three kinds of builders identified by Paul?

1. (v.14) A Biblically Wise Builder—he uses materials which are lasting and can stand the test of fire. [Ask the group: How would you describe this kind of builder in the Body of Christ?]
 - a. Their aim is to glorify Christ, not themselves.
 - b. Their goal is not so much to make converts—sheer numbers, but to make disciples. (Quality over quantity.)
 - c. Their work is based on spiritual things such as the Spirit, prayer and God's Word, not earthly tools.
 - d. Others?
2. (v.15) A Worldly Builder—he uses materials which cannot stand up to the test. [Ask the group: How would you describe this kind of builder?]
 - a. More interested in attendance than in discipleship.
 - b. Efforts often appeal more to earthly standards rather than biblical ones.
 - c. Often incorporates more ideas and inspiration from worldly approaches and models than biblically grounded ones.
 - d. Others?
3. (v.17) The Destroyer—the underlying Greek term "*phtheirei*" conveying the meaning of to destroy through corruption. [Ask the group: How would you describe this "anti-builder"?]
 - a. Their aim is to glorify themselves instead of Christ.
 - b. They strive to get everyone to live for the comforts of this life instead of the next.
 - c. Their goal is to elevate self-interest, to undermine all personal relationships.
 - d. They seek to operate all things strictly according to the world's standards and definitions rather than according to God's Word.
 - e. Others?

Q: What is the difference between these three types?

A: Both the wise builder and worldly builder are Christians who will both be saved in the end, but whose rewards will be dramatically different based on how they carried out their responsibilities; the destroyer is an enemy of the cross who will suffer ultimate and eternal destruction by God.

Application: *Spiritual leaders are ultimately judged according to the spiritual quality of their results, whether eternal for rewards, temporal for a loss of all except their salvation, or permanently should they be revealed to actually be false shepherds.*

¹⁸Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS"; ²⁰and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS." ²¹So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, ²³and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

[Read v.18-23]

Q: How might this concluding section fit with themes Paul established in the opening chapters of this Epistle?

A: Paul has warned about trusting in men (2:5) and resisting the urge to glorify them. (2:18-23) Throughout these chapters he has established the case for seeking to know and apply the wisdom of God and not the wisdom of the world, often co-equally described as "foolishness", the opposite of biblical wisdom.

Q: What is the "wisdom" Paul summarizes here which he would like to see a mature church take hold of?

A: It's not just that we are not the community property of a single teacher, but that our teachers belong to the collective whole, and additionally that all together we belong collectively to Christ.

Q: What is especially profound about the short list of things Paul says belong to us?
A: It's not just this world **AND** the next, not just life **AND** death, but both the present **AND** the future. (v.22)

*"He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son."
— Revelation 21:7*

Application: *Do we sometimes see ourselves more like a corporate organization chart, belonging to a department rather than the company as a whole?*

Application: *Spiritual leaders never claim it is "their" church alone, but facilitate everyone's understanding that "all things belong to you".*

Overall Application

- As God's field, we are to receive the Word of God implanted in us and bear spiritual fruit.
- As God's temple, we are to be built with spiritually lasting materials for the glory of God.
- Each of us, regardless of office or gift, are making contributions, be they gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw.
- But the ultimate quality of our work, which speaks to our level of spiritual maturity, is found in the quality of our personal relationships.