

1 CORINTHIANS 3

You Are God's Field, God's Building

REVIEW: The first issue that Paul addressed in his correspondence to the Corinthian saints was their quarreling and divisive spirit (1.11-12). But why were they quarreling and dividing when this was not the will of God? It is plain that they had been following human wisdom, gravitating toward various teachers who had a different spin on the simplicity of the gospel. Thus, Paul has had much to say about wisdom in these opening chapters:

- » The wisdom of God seems like foolishness to the world (1.18-25).
- » They were not the wise of this world, which was why they had accepted the “foolish” message of the cross. Thus, their only boasting should be in the Lord (1.26-31)
- » Paul did not come with elegant speech and human wisdom, rather he presented the gospel to them. Their faith rested on the gospel, and not on human wisdom (2.1-5)
- » Those who were mature would listen to Paul and other inspired teachers, because they had the mind of God revealed to them by God's Spirit (2.6-13).

Chapter 2 concluded with Paul contrasting the “natural man” and those who are “spiritual”. The natural man does not accept the things revealed by God's Spirit, because they seem foolish to him. However, those how are spiritual know and accept the things revealed by God's Spirit. Thus, they listen to Paul and other inspired teachers because, “we have the mind of Christ.”

But what of the Corinthians? Were they “natural men” or “spiritual”? Chapter 3 opens with Paul addressing that very question.

Vs. 1-4, Their conduct showed that they were following the flesh and not the Spirit.

1. There's some interesting wordplay in this section. Paul relates how he had given them milk to drink in vss. 1-2. This probably refers to the

18 months that Paul had been there as related in Acts 18. The reason why he had given them milk and not meat is that they were “men of flesh... infants in Christ.” There was nothing wrong with this, new converts need the basics. Paul had given them this.

2. The problem was that they had not grown up! They were still “fleshly” (vs.3). When Paul spoke of them as “men of flesh” in vs. 1 he used the word, sarkinos. Now in vs. 3 he uses the word sarkikos. The difference? “The difference between sarkinos and sarkikos is like that between ‘fleshy’ and ‘fleshly’ (cf. Lenski, ‘“fleshy,” and you cannot help it; “fleshly,” and you can but do not help it’). The more thoroughgoing word is sarkinos, but there is no blame attaching to it as applied to those who are young in the faith. But sarkikos, ‘characterized by flesh’, when used of those who have been Christians for years, is blameworthy. The mature believer is pneumatikos, ‘characterized by spirit’. To be characterized instead by flesh, as the Corinthians were, is the very opposite of what Christians should be.” (Leon Morris in the Tyndale commentary)
3. The evidence of their “fleshlyness” was in their quarreling and dividing (vs. 4). Recall that quarreling is one of the works of the flesh numbered in Galatians 5.19-21.
4. But going back to Paul's main thought, this meant bad things for their receptiveness to Paul's message. Again, Paul and other inspired teachers were delivering the mind of God to them, because the Spirit had revealed it to these select individuals. Since the Corinthians were “walking like mere men” they were still unable to receive the solid food that God intended for them to receive.

Vs. 5-9, The proper evaluation of preachers & teachers

1. Their jealousy and strife had resulted in division, some claiming to be of Paul, others claiming to be of Apollos. Human wisdom was involved in this as people gravitated toward supposed differences in the styles and messages of these teachers. So, Paul addresses how these Christians should view himself, Apollos and any other teacher of God's will.
2. They shouldn't glory in Paul or Apollos, for they were just servants doing the job they were called to do! The glory belongs solely to God!
3. An interesting point can be made from the tenses in vs. 6. Paul planted (past tense), Apollos watered (past tense), God was causing the growth (imperfect tense, indicating continued activity).
4. Paul and Apollos had a job to do: plant and water. They would be rewarded so long as they labored for the Lord. Note, their reward was based on their labor, not the results of their labor! Furthermore, there was no division between Paul and Apollos. They were both doing the work of God, and thus "are one" (vs. 8) and "fellow workers" (vs. 9).
5. Vs. 5 serves two purpose:
 - » That they were God's field and building indicated their role in this. They needed to allow Paul and Apollos to do their work so that the growth God wanted in them could occur.
 - » Transitioning from "field" to "building" will allow Paul to make his next point.

Vs. 10-17, Be Careful how you build on the foundation.

1. Building imagery takes center stage in this passage. But this isn't just any building, it's God's building, His temple (vs. 16)!
2. Paul's role was in laying the foundation, and of course the only foundation that could be laid is Jesus Christ (vss.10-11; cf. 1:23; 2:2).
3. Now, others were building on that foundation, and they must be careful how they build!
4. Some see this passage as applying to the type of converts being added to the building. However, it seems more likely that Paul is referring

to the teachings and not the converts.

- » The contrast in chapters 1&2 has been between the wisdom of the world (foolishness) and the foolishness of the cross (true wisdom), cf. 1:21-25; 2:6-9, 12-13.
 - » Paul laid the one true foundation: Jesus Christ, i.e the message of the crucifixion (1:23).
 - » Now others must build (i.e. teach) what would truly build up the church.
5. If I am correct, it would seem that the best way to read the passage would be:
 - » Those who built with gold, silver & precious stones were the ones who continued teaching the true gospel of Christ. These materials (gospel teaching) belong in God's Temple. These materials (gospel teaching) would last when the testing fire came and the teacher(s) would be rewarded.
 - » Those who built with wood, hay and straw were relying more on the wisdom of the world in their teaching. Must be careful here to emphasize that their teachings were not destructive to the church, i.e. not false, but by trying to bring worldly wisdom into the gospel they were not building anything that would last. Such materials (teaching) really don't belong in a temple. Such work would perish, but they would escape (but perhaps barely).
 - » However, there were some whose teaching was destructive to the building (God's temple). Any who advocated the divisive doctrines mentioned in vs. 4 would fall into this category. The destructive nature of their work would be repaid in that they would be destroyed themselves!
 6. Point of application: who we listen to is so very important. There are many teachers out there. Some are good, some not so good. We should always be evaluating teachers by what Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, etc. had to say, for they revealed the mind of God to us!

Vs. 18-23, Become fools that you may be wise!

1. We've now come full circle. They've been act-

ing like fleshly men, now it's time to be spiritual! They've boasted in their wisdom, but now it's time to become foolish so that they can accept God's wisdom!

2. A stern warning is given for those who would continue to boast in human wisdom: God knows the folly you're in and it will be useless! (vss. 19-20; Job 5.13; Psalm 94.11).
3. So, quit boasting in men. After all, God had given them all things (not men). Furthermore, they now belong to Christ, just as Christ belongs to God. Christ didn't glory in man, He gloried in the Father. So, why should they do otherwise?