

Planting and Building for God

I Corinthians 3:1-23

March 2, 2025

You may have heard about the two new employees for a contractor. They had finished framing a house and were starting to nail the siding on. While one was holding the siding, the other was driving the nails. The guy holding the watches as his buddy picks up a nail, hammers it in, picks up another nail and throws it over his shoulder, and continues to do so. Finally the holder asked the hammerer, "What are you doing? You're throwing away half our nails." "I can't use them, they're pointed on the wrong end." "You idiot!" said the other, "those are for the other side of the house!" Our Scripture today will warn us to be careful how we build. Please open your Bibles today to I Corinthians 3.

A couple Sundays ago we began digging into the rich mine of I Corinthians and so far we have found quality gems in the first and second chapters that have hopefully added to our spiritual wealth and health. My prayer is that they are not only instructive to our minds and hearts, but prescriptive for the way we act. Today we're going to dig deeper into Chapter 3. If you are able, please stand as we get our shovels out and dig in. I Cor 3: Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? 4 For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? 5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe — as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7 So **neither** he who plants nor he who waters is **anything**, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

In the first two chapters, Paul has been addressing some issues that had arisen in this young church and the first was divisions over leadership which he mentions here again. I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, etc. We spoke to that two weeks ago, so you can go back and listen, but here Paul emphasizes the cooperative nature of Jesus' church. It is a group effort where each person's contributions are important. He'll spend a whole chapter talking about that later on but here he uses an easily understood farming illustration. He says, "I planted, Apollos watered, and God made it grow." Praise God for Paul's work at planting churches and more importantly planting the certified seed of God's Holy Word! Praise God for Apollos' work of watering that seed, of providing it with sustenance and nourishment and encouragement that the conditions would be favorable for that seed to germinate and to sprout. But ultimately, the growth of every seed is a miracle of God. That is true physically and it's true spiritually.

Biologists can describe what happens when a seed germinates and how it sprouts, etc. But they cannot make a single one do so. Like farmers, they can only create conditions favorable for that to happen. The germination, sprouting, and growth of every single seed in nature is a miracle of God every time. A cornfield with a million cornstalks is a field of one million miracles! Every wheatfield and forest and yard. God created and programmed seeds to grow and grow they do!

And Paul likens the Gospel of Jesus Christ to such a seed. It too is certified. It's good seed, the best. It **will** grow if given proper conditions! In this case Paul planted those seeds in the fertile soil of those Corinthian hearts and Apollo came along and watered them. But salvation and transformation in a person's life is a miracle of God! As the Gospel takes root and grows, the goal is not just to produce a nice plant. Just as you want your corn seeds to produce not just cornstalks, but roasting ears, the goal of planting and watering the Gospel is to ultimately bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. But if nourishment is cut off or disease comes in, fruit production will be hampered or thwarted altogether. And Paul warns them and us that division in the cornfield prevents fruit production. Rather, **unity** is the climate in which most spiritual fruit is produced in a life and in a church.

We who plant, water, and tend are nothing compared to the Heavenly Gardener who makes it grow. To Him be all the glory! Heinrich Bullinger has said, "The success of the gospel does not belong to its ministers but to God. A person labors in vain who scatters the seed of God's word in the field of the heart unless the power of the Most High touches the heart and makes it able to receive the seed and bear fruit." God can produce fruit in spite of our poor planting and watering, for the Lord does this and it is marvelous in our eyes.

And each worker will receive rewards for his or her work. Say rewards. Those of you who plant in Sunday School and BLAST, those of you who water with fervent prayer and fasting. Those fertilize with encouragement and care will each be rewarded according to your labor. Too often many of us spread the wrong kind of fertilizer and we can spread it pretty deep. Let's fertilize with our encouraging words, for we are God's fellow workers. In fact, Paul says, we are God's field. Not as individual believers independently following some Christian teacher or author, but together as a church we are God's field. We're each an acre on which God can grow the fruit of His choosing.

Then, just in case you've got more experience as a builder than a farmer, Paul changes the metaphor. Say building. Paul says we are God's building. Let's look to see what He says about our building in Vs 10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already

laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13 his work **will** be shown for what it is, because the **Day** will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. 15 If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Say architect. Before the contractor started building this sanctuary, an architect, John Mather, designed it. He not only designed it to be a place that would be good to worship in, but in so doing, he knew the codes and methods of construction that were needed to make the structure sturdy, safe, and strong. Then the contractor, Harman, came and started building it according to the blueprints the architect developed using the right nails on the right sides.

The Greek word in Verse 10 for expert builder is *architekton*. *Tekton* means builder and *architekton* is a superior builder. Obviously that's where our word architect comes from. Paul says God gave him the ability and skills to be a spiritual architect and as such he laid the foundation for the Corinthian church. That foundation was none other than Jesus Christ, His birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection. Every true church of God today must be built on that same foundation or it isn't really a church. It may be a close knit group. It may do a lot of good deeds and may even give a lot of money to good causes. But it's not a church. A **church** has to be built on Jesus Christ! We must stand on Him and His promises!

In some homes around here, it becomes necessary to repair or replace foundations that have given out and sometimes the same is needed in a church. If a church has strayed from Jesus, it must do some foundation work to bring Him back! Sadly, some churches have replaced their Jesus foundation with something else. To follow modern thoughts or fads. Some churches are built on making money, others on networking. Some are built on music or on the youth. All of this can be a part of the superstructure above, but the foundation beneath must always be Christ and Christ alone as we sang last week! God, help us fiercely maintain the integrity of a Jesus foundation. May He show us any cracks. And help us patch them up.

And then Paul talks about various materials that could be used to build the structure itself. Say materials. Those same genius builders I mentioned earlier went to Lowe's and told the guy they needed some 2x4s. The guy says, "OK, how **long** do you need them?" Well, they answered, we're building a house. We're going to need them for many years." Paul too advises us to build with materials that will last not just many years, but eternally. Gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay and straw were all used at that time for various buildings depending on the builder's budget. Obviously, the more expensive components would last longer and result in a more beautiful building. The less expensive would not last as long and could easily burn up as Paul reminds us.

And oh, by the way, there is a Day coming, capital D, when the building will be tested. Judged. And that with fire. What's he talking about? He's talking about the Judgment Seat of Christ. Not the Great White Throne where people will enter heaven or be condemned to hell based on what they do with Jesus but this judgement just for Christians will be to assign rewards. Those who built up Jesus' church with sincerity, earnestness, their best efforts guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit will be rewarded accordingly. Their work will have produced lasting spiritual benefit for Jesus. Conversely, those who worked half-heartedly or less, those who couldn't care less about God's work, those who built with resentment or only out of obligation will see their work go up in flames. They will be saved, but only as one escaping through the fire, Paul says. Our work should not be shallow and temporary but eternal and everlasting.

Not all church work is done in the church. Many of you are doing God's work in your jobs or in your homes or in your community. But if we're only working for selfish reasons in any of those places and not for Godly reasons, our work will be exposed for what it is and for what it isn't. If we're only working to be seen, to be applauded, to be honored by people, we don't need to look for any recognition for the Lord at His judgment seat on that Day.

I never read this passage without thinking about the three little pigs. The differences between straw, sticks, and bricks are certainly revealed when the big bad wolf huffs and puffs and tries to blow their houses down. The difference is that the judgement day Paul is talking about is to evaluate, not punish, and certainly not to devour the occupants, like the pigs, but to reward those who built wisely. I sometimes think about those who say that even if all their work is burned up and there is no reward at all, "Well, at least I made it." I would suggest that if there is no desire to build something of eternal value for Jesus, we probably don't even know Him. For if we do, we'll want to do His work. Not for reward, but for His glory. How sad and even insulting will be those words, "At least I made it," before the One who shed His blood for us. Let's spend our time working on what will last! Building with materials that will endure the fire and come forth as gold!

Do you want to see your life's work go up in flames? How do you want your work to fare? I don't know about you, but I want the gold, silver, and gemstone work. Stuff that won't burn. We've talked before about how confederate money became worthless after the Civil War. How often we spend our energy and our lives amassing Confederate bills that will all burn up. What investments are best? What activities, thoughts, efforts should we be involved in? Those that last! Obeying Jesus. Loving others. Sharing the Gospel. Helping the poor. Telling the truth. Put your time and energy into investments, projects, ventures and efforts that will escape the fire, and into assets that will be purified by the fire, not consumed in it.

Vs 16 “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.” Paul is circling back to what he mentioned up in verse 9, we are God's building. But not just any building, we are His holy Temple building! Say temple. Temples are places where gods live! Paul's statement here would have been very powerful to these Corinthian Christians who lived in the shadows of massive temples of Apollo, Aphrodite, and others. Instead of a house for a lifeless idol, these Christians, he says, were a temple for the Living God!

Say We're a temple. Not just individually as we'll get to later in this letter, but collectively as the whole congregation, we are God's temple together. The Greek word for you in vs 16 is plural: you all, all ya'all are God's temple. Not temples. Whenever someone is missing, the temple is incomplete. The Old Testament tells us that gold, silver, and precious stones were used in building Solomon's Temple and they're also going to be in the new Jerusalem as well! So we must build the church with high quality spiritual materials. Only the best for the temple of the living God!

God's presence actually filled the Temple and especially in the Holy of Holies which only the high priest could enter once each year with a blood sacrifice. Jesus went into that Holy of Holies with His own blood to atone for our sins and ripped the curtain in tow so that God can now dwell with us! In the church! This is the holy of holies this morning and this is where God lives among His people! The Temple is where God reveals Himself. It is where He is worshipped as we are doing today. Instead of referring to this physical **building** as God's house, let's remember that the ecclesia, the church body, the gathered believers, is the holy Temple of God! Let's look for Him to reveal Himself as we worship Him in spirit and in truth in this His gathered holy Temple.

Which brings us back to what Paul started this chapter with. A warning about being carnal Christians. Say carnal. The NIV translates it as worldly. John MacArthur says it means controlled by the **fallen** flesh. The Amplified Bible says, “under the control of ordinary impulses” like mere men, like ordinary non-Christians. The Greek can be mean unregenerate, not changed by being saved. It can mean acting like an animal with no morals. Brethren writer Harold Martin says, “The word for carnal is what a person in the natural state cannot help being... These carnal Christians in Corinth were still letting their old fleshly nature control their lives. They were under the control of the self-nature instead of being governed by the spirit of God.” They were still living as though Jesus was not their Lord. And sadly, there are many carnal Christians like that today. They may have accepted Jesus as Savior but they certainly aren't living for Him or like Him. They aren't building with any eternal materials, but rather, as the foolish builders we've laughed at today. We can all fall to our carnal flesh at times and we have to be ever vigilant against this for we are building an eternal structure. As we will sing in a minute, we must ask Him to “change my heart oh God.” And, as we found last week, Change my Mind. And change my actions. Change me.

Envy and strife are characteristics of carnality. Let us not undermine or damage God's Holy Temple with quarrels and divisions that Paul mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. These things pull bricks out of the temple walls and weaken the whole structure. They deface the beauty and bring pain to One who lives within the temple. When we build with selfish motives or fail to build at all, we damage God's Temple and forfeit eternal personal rewards. And verse 17 warns us that God will destroy those who destroy His sacred temple, His holy Church. How much rather, we are to be a glorious temple, a beautiful, tall, sturdy, golden structure of godly character sparkling with the jewels of good works in which He loves to dwell. Let's do what we can to make that happen!