

“The Foundation”

The Sixth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 3:1-15; 1 Chronicles 29:1-5

Even though Greeks see the cross as foolishness, and Jews stumble at the thought of a crucified Messiah, Paul has made his case that the cross of Jesus Christ is the revelation of the wisdom of God as well as a demonstration of the Holy Spirit’s power. In chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians, Paul now moves on to address the specifics of what is going wrong in the church in Corinth. The Corinthians still rely on human wisdom instead that of wisdom revealed by God in the preaching of the gospel. And this reliance on human wisdom has led to a host of problems in this church, beginning with the formation of various factions. As Paul points out, the sole foundation of church has already been laid through the preaching of the gospel. The question the apostle now puts to the Corinthians is “what kind of church are they building on that foundation?”

We are in the midst of a series on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church. We have completed the first two chapters of this letter in which Paul has diagnosed the first in a series of problems plaguing the Corinthians—division and schism within the church. Paul now explains why this problem exists in this particular church. As good Greeks, the Corinthians love human wisdom. And while the Corinthian Christians seem to understand the gospel, there is an intellectual struggle going on in this church as these new Christians are slow in learning to think like Christians, while at the same time they are having trouble leaving their pagan ways behind.

Having spelled out that the fact that true wisdom is revealed in the cross, Paul now makes his case that the Corinthians are immature. And so in chapter 3, Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for this lack of maturity. To make his case, Paul uses two vivid metaphors: adults (mature) v. infants, and solid food (meat) v. milk. Paul uses these familiar figures of speech to illustrate the false assumption on the part of the Corinthians that they were making real progress in the Christian life, when the fact of the matter is that they were not any progress at all.¹ The behavior of many in this congregation demonstrates that they are anything but mature. The reality is the Corinthians are behaving like infants. The wisdom of God has not sufficiently informed their thinking, nor their conduct. They may think of themselves as mature, but Paul must point out to them that they are but infants.

So, as we now move into chapter 3, it is important to keep Paul’s use of these analogies in mind, and to notice that for Paul, the gospel is the foundation for everything else done in the church.

In the first verse of chapter 3, Paul addresses the problem with the Corinthian’s failure to fully understand the source of true wisdom. “*But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.*” Paul softens the coming rebuke a bit by referring to the Corinthians as brothers, a term of endearment. After all, these are people with whom he lived and labored for some time. Despite Paul’s deep and abiding personal affection for these people, the congregation is about to be rebuked by an apostle!

When Paul had been with the Corinthians earlier, he could not speak to them as “spiritual” or as mature

¹ Hays, First Corinthians, 48.

(adults), but as “worldly,” a term which literally means, “fleshy.” As new Christians—mere babes in Christ—the Corinthians were still conformed to the non-Christian pattern of this age in their thinking about the Christian life and related issues. It is hard to unlearn non-Christian attitudes and ways of thinking. When pagans become Christians, it takes time to stop thinking like pagans. Paul, no doubt, carefully considered this when he began to instruct them previously. He knows this is a struggle for the Corinthians. But it is clear to him that they should have made much more progress than they have.

Paul reminds the Corinthians in verse 2 of how he had taught them personally. *“I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready.”* Since the Corinthians were infants and unable to digest solid food, Paul gave them milk. Milk is a metaphor for the basic doctrines of the Christian faith which we teach new Christians—things like the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, justification by grace alone through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. This practice is what we commonly call catechesis, or “instruction.” It was not the Corinthian’s fault that they were infants. Paul took them as he found them, and feed them accordingly. This, by the way, is the whole purpose for catechism! The *Heidelberg Catechism* was written for the very purpose of providing doctrinal instruction for children and new converts in the central teaching of the Bible, as well as establishing a common theological language and ethos within the church (even among the mature).

But the current situation in Corinth reflects the same level of immaturity in which Paul had found them when the initial members of this church came to faith. The Corinthians should have grown up by now, but, sadly they haven’t. In fact, says Paul, these people still are not ready for solid food! The reason why is given in verses 3-4. *“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? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human?”*

Instead of showing signs of maturity, the Corinthians are still fleshy—although it is important to note that the new Christians in Corinth could not help being *fleshy*, they were new Christians after all. But the Corinthians should be moving toward maturity, and they are not. Their conduct is characterized by behavior typical of non-Christian Greek pagans—the same behavior they exercised before their conversion. For Paul, the “flesh” is a characteristic way of speaking of the sinful human nature which lies at the heart of what Paul has been calling worldliness. The contrast Paul sets out is between those who have the mind of Christ and who have matured in their thinking, with those who still act like pagans because they still have the mind of this age, (the fleshy).² It is those who demonstrate immature behavior who come under Paul’s rebuke.

This immature and fleshy behavior (characteristic of non-Christians) manifests itself in the following behavior. There are factions forming in the church, with two of the most significant ones, apparently, centered around Paul and his close associate, Apollos. The members of these factions were now openly quarreling with each other, and apparently, each group was jealous (envious) of the other. This divisive behavior, Paul says, is that of mere men—i.e., that of people who conform themselves to the wisdom of this world, not the wisdom of God manifest in the cross. Instead of focusing upon God and his purposes made manifest in the preaching of Christ crucified, the Corinthians are focusing upon their personal (and

² Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 61-62. Cf. Barrett, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, 80, on the point that *pneumatikoi* should be understood as mature.

selfish) agendas.³ And this kind of thing is nothing but a manifestation of the flesh.

To stop the on-going formation of factions in the church, Paul must first address the subject of what ministry truly entails—and that is service. A minister is called to serve the whole church, not to lead or encourage that portion of it who are attracted to him or to his teaching. Second, Paul must address the nature of the church itself and the foundation upon which it is built—the person and work of Jesus Christ.

To form factions around Paul and Apollos is to completely misunderstand what Paul and Apollos were actually doing. Paul and Apollos are not sages, nor philosophers, nor are their individual personalities and styles what ultimately mattered, or made them effective. Rather, both are servants of Jesus Christ, called to specific offices (church planting v. instruction in the faith). Paul exposes the immaturity of the Corinthians by using one of his characteristic rhetorical questions in verse 5. *“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.”*

It is important that we notice that Paul doesn’t ask, “who” are Paul and Apollos, but “what” are Paul and Apollos. It is the immature person who focuses upon the personalities involved (“the who”), while Paul sees the office (“the what”) to which he and Apollos have been called to be critical issue. Paul and Apollos are mere servants of Christ. The word Paul uses here (servants), is elsewhere in the New Testament translated as “deacons,” which became a distinct office within the church devoted to the ministry of mercy. The word is probably used here in reference to the fact that in one sense, all ministers are servants.⁴ And how can servants be put up on a pedestal and made to be leaders of divisive factions? It is through the differing ministries of Paul and Apollos, that many in the Corinthian church came to faith. Paul and Apollos are merely the sinful human instruments that God has used to create and build the church in Corinth.⁵ But this is what the Corinthians are failing to grasp.

Since it is the Lord who called them to their unique offices, Paul uses the following analogy in verses 7-8: *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.”* Botanical metaphors are used elsewhere by Paul (one of the most important is in Romans 11, where Paul speaks of Christ as the righteous root and Jews as natural branches, and Gentiles as wild branches). These metaphors made perfect sense in the first century Mediterranean world which was an agrarian society.

Paul and Apollos clearly have different callings. Paul is the evangelist/church planter. He plants the seed (founds the churches). Apollos, on the other hand, does the work of caring for the Lord’s vineyard through teaching and instructing. He waters the seed Paul has planted, ensuring that it grows. Both Paul and Apollos are only ministers (Christ’s servants). But Paul and Apollos are allies in this cause, and not rivals, as their followers were making them out to be.⁶ It is God who creates churches, and it is God alone who brings about growth through specific means. Paul and Apollos may have different roles, but

³ Barrett, Epistle to the Corinthians, 81.

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 63.

⁵ Barrett, Epistle to the Corinthians, 84.

⁶ Barrett, Epistle to the Corinthians, 85.

they only have one goal.

Since it is God alone who grants the increase, why divide over the style and abilities of God's servants, who merely plant and water? Paul and Apollos are nothing. It is God who causes all things to grow. And so even though Paul and Apollos have different callings (and different styles and abilities), since God is the one who grants the increase, Paul and Apollos actually have one common purpose. Church planting and evangelism are not more important than catechizing and shepherding God's flock. God will reward his servants not according to their worldly success, but according to their faithfulness!

The conclusion, in verse 9, is now clear. *"For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building."* In the Greek sentence, the word *theos* is placed first in the three clauses for emphasis. Because it is God who calls us, it is God who reveals Jesus Christ to us, it is God who gives us his Holy Spirit and so on, it is God who grants the increase when churches are founded, non-Christians are evangelized, and then Christians are grounded in their faith. This means that the church and all who are in it, are God's garden. Because the church is Christ's, this is why people are not free to cause division and form their own factions. Paul and Apollos, along with all those in the church are fellow-workers. We are all part of God's field (garden), and therefore, we are in need of care and cultivation. We can't simply uproot ourselves and create a new garden. Nor should we view our ministers as Christian celebrities who lead their own factions. Ministers are servants, who preach the word, administer the sacraments and provide pastoral care for the churches.

Notice that Paul also adds a new metaphor which he will use throughout the balance of the chapter. He points out that we are all part of God's building (the temple of which he will speak in verses 16-17). This simply means that those who have the mind of Christ realize the organic nature of the church, while those who are fleshly, see the church through the same lens as do non-Christians. For such people personalities, self-interest, and false standards of evaluation (like "was the worship and the sermon entertaining?"), are more important than God's purposes and the faithful preaching of Christ.

Following the change in metaphor from a garden to a building, (no doubt, based in part upon the theological connection between Israel's temple and the church), Paul now reminds his immature readers that the foundation of the church is none other than Christ himself. The language used here by Paul echoes various Old Testament descriptions of the temple (in terms of how it was built and consecrated). One such passage to which Paul is probably alluding here is 1 Chronicles 29:1-5 (our Old Testament lesson), where the high quality and quantity of the gold and silver used in the temple's implements is mentioned, along with the desire God's people have to consecrate themselves to the Lord in response to the grandeur before their eyes. Paul's point is that if Christ is building his temple (the church), and we are part of that temple, then, who are we to destroy what Christ himself is building? Furthermore, who are we to build a building of our own upon another foundation? This is why the Corinthians must exercise both care and caution in the building of the church. The Corinthian church is Christ's, not theirs! Christ Reformed is Christ's, not ours.

For Paul, the building of the church and its organic unity must be seen in relationship to the grace of God (v. 10-11). *"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. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."* First and foremost, Paul's efforts have come about because of the grace of God. God has enabled the Apostle and the other servants of the

gospel who have served the Corinthian church, (i.e., Apollos) to do what he has done.⁷

That said, Paul describes himself as an skilled builder—literally a “wise” builder, or one who supervises the construction of a building (an architect). Paul has laid the foundation, which is Christ, through the preaching of the cross, even though someone (presumably Apollos) is now building upon that same foundation by instructing the Corinthians in Christian doctrine. Since the foundation is Christ (specifically the message of the cross, foolishness to the Greek, stumbling block to the Jew, but to those who are being saved the very power of God), men who build upon that foundation must be very careful. Just as Israel brought the best gold and silver into the house of God to be used for the vessels and implements in the temple, so too the Corinthians should be careful about how they seek to build the house of God (the church), on that foundation which Paul has already laid.

This is, no doubt, a warning for the church to maintain sound doctrine, and for Christians to avoid being conformed to the pattern of this age. As Paul reminds the Ephesians (cf. 4:4-6), “*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*” Sound doctrine must be taught, and immature Christians must become mature. Indeed, since the foundation of the building (temple) which God building is Christ and him crucified, there can be no other foundation than the one that Paul has already set down when he first preached the gospel in Corinth.

This is why Paul states in verses 12-15: “*Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—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. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*” Unfortunately, this verse is often used to terrorize Christians—if you haven’t done enough for Christ and his church, you will suffer loss. But that is not quite what the Apostle is warning against.

Although there is but one foundation (Christ, specifically Christ as he is revealed in the gospel), there are any number of various building materials with which a building may be built. There are materials of great worth (silver, gold, costly stones) and there are materials which are ultimately worthless: wood, hay and straw. The workman may try to build a building worthy of the foundation (using God’s wisdom to do it), or else he may build a cheap and useless edifice upon a precious foundation (using human or worldly wisdom). As one scholar reminds us, there is no sense here that cheap materials are purified by the fire. Rather, they are consumed by the flames.⁸ One either builds the church through the preaching of the cross and through instruction in sound doctrine, or one attempts to build the church through the wisdom of men which inevitably creates factions and division. One is worthy of the foundation, the other is not. One of these buildings will not survive the struggles sure to come.

Paul is clear that one day there will come a time of testing. Most likely, “The day,” is for Paul a reference to the day of judgment (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:4), which is that time when the works of God’s people are judged and accepted in Christ whose wisdom is then vindicated in the transformation of his people along the lines stated in Ephesians 2:10—“*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for*

⁷ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 65.

⁸ Barrett, Epistle to the Corinthians, 89.

*good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*⁹ That is this is the case is clear, because Paul speaks of fire consuming the efforts of those who build with wood, hay and straw upon the foundation of Christ, while those who build with silver, gold and precious stones, will be rewarded (literally his be given his wages). Those who utilize flimsy building materials will barely escape, and their efforts to build Christ's church will be seen as futile and not worthy of the glorious foundation upon which they have been laid.

What, then, do we say by way of application?

First, given the way this passage is often interpreted, it is important to point out that Paul is not warning Christians that they had better make more progress in their sanctification, or else. Paul is not telling Christians that unless they give their all (their "gold, silver and precious stones"), and stop being half-hearted (wood, hay, straw), they risk perishing on the day of judgment. Rather, Paul's point to the Corinthian church is that human wisdom is mere wood, hay and straw, and not at all worthy of the foundation (Christ and him crucified) which Paul laid down through the preaching of the gospel. Building a church on human wisdom inevitably leads to division and factionalism. Building a church on human wisdom is like using wood from Home Depot. It is too green, filled with knots, and comes with termites already in it. Rather, we use God's ways, grounded in God's wisdom, to build Christ's church. This is what Paul means when he speaks of gold, silver, and precious stones. These things withstand both difficult times and divine judgment. God's wisdom is worth far more than anything we can come up with.

Second, we need to carefully consider Paul's warning about the seriousness of factions and schism within the church. The church is Christ's—not ours. To divide his body into factions, or to treat Christian leaders, pastors and teachers as though they were celebrities to be followed by groupies, is to demonstrate spiritual immaturity. Instead, Paul exhorts us to see those who labor among us as servants who minister the word of Christ to us. This is why we need to see the church as the body of Christ, and not someone's personal empire or property. The entrepreneurial spirit is the engine of capitalism (and that's a good thing), but it doesn't work well in the church. The church is not the place for men to build monuments to themselves. The church is that place where men serve Christ by applying God's wisdom to the fundamental human problem—our sin. And Paul ties this to the continual preaching of Christ.

Finally, Paul reminds us that the foundation of the church is the gospel—the preaching of Christ and him crucified. This is the foundation upon which the church is built, and this message reveals to us the wisdom of God and its application to the various aspects of the Christian life. Through the preaching of Christ, God has called us to faith, and united us together into one body, one church, with one common faith. We are God's garden. We are God's building—God's temple as Paul puts it later in the chapter, indwelt by God's Spirit. There are no other foundations, there is no other gospel. God calls some of us to plant, some of us to water, some of us to tend the garden in various ways. This is why we take such great care about how we build on the one foundation. By laboring together, we are building a church from gold, silver and precious gems. By centering everything we do upon Christ and him crucified, each one's work will be manifest, and our labors will withstand both the trials of life and the judgment of God.

And all of this because Jesus Christ shed his blood for all of our sins, fulfilled God's law through his perfect obedience, so that trusting in Christ alone we need never fear the wrath of God again. For in the

⁹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 66. Cf. Barrett, The Epistle to the Corinthians, 88.

gospel of Jesus Christ we have the unshakable foundation upon which to build Christ's church. Amen.