

Lesson 5
Notes on 1 Corinthians. 3:1-15

One of the major failures in the Corinthian church was their wrong view of Christian leadership. This has already become apparent in 1: 11-16. They were far too ready to put the spotlight on individuals, to play one off against another, to compare this person with that person. They needed straight teaching on the nature and the function of Christian leadership. Actually, to use the word 'leadership' is to beg' the question. As Paul proceeds to show in chapters 3 and 4, such a concept, if seen through secular spectacles, is virtually absent from and fundamentally alien to the New Testament. Because today there is such a focus in secular circles on the need for leadership, and often for one particular model of leadership (according to one's political leanings), it is important that the church rediscovers what the Scriptures really teach about genuinely Christian leadership. These two chapters give us many clues.

In correcting the false and boastful wisdom of the Corinthians, Paul's fertile and imaginative mind calls into play several vivid metaphors which we will examine, together with the final paragraph of chapter 3 concerning worldly wisdom.

1. Babies and adults (3:1-4)

We have already noted Paul's lament (1) that the church at Corinth was not in any sense spiritual. 'By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body' 'and all were made to drink of one Spirit' (12:13). But following the Spirit's direction, walking in the Spirit's power, demonstrating the unity of the Spirit? -- certainly not. The simplicity of Paul's instruction had given occasion to the false apostles (2Cor. 11:12-15) to criticize him as a shallow teacher (2 Cor. 10: 10), rather than as one who had the "mind of Christ." To this the apostle replies that their own immature condition up to the time when he left them, rendered them incapable of any fuller instruction. Far from being mature disciples (2:8; Eph. 4:13), they were still swayed by the prejudices and passions of the unregenerate life out of which they had been but lately born, and to which they were not wholly dead. The Corinthians themselves reckoned that they were very spiritual, that they were wise and mature Christians, not least because of a multiplicity of spiritual gifts on view in their life together. But Paul is firm: But I, brethren, *could not* address you as spiritual men. The

problem, it turns out, was not with the message at all but with those who had put themselves in a position so as not to be able to hear and understand what was being said to them. Their failure to understand the wisdom spoken in a mystery was not due to the fact that Paul is withholding it from them, but is the result of their own inability to digest what he is offering them. He does not hesitate to call them brethren, but he has to call them also men of the flesh (1), ordinary men (3), merely men (4). In fact, he calls them babes; babes in Christ, certainly, but still hardly able to speak any words at all in terms of real wisdom from above. Paul seeks to get them to stop *thinking* like people of this present age and to stop *behaving* like people of this present age. They are "unspiritual" not because they are not "brothers and sisters," but because they are involved in a lot of unchristian behavior; not because they do not have the Spirit, but because they behave like those who lack the Spirit.

Apparently, this had been the case with the Corinthians from the beginning: I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready (2). Interestingly, Paul reckoned it was in order for new believers to be given 'meat' as well as 'milk', but not at Corinth. They were not ready for it, even some years on from their conversion to Christ. Mere lapse of time does not bring Christian maturity. This analogy was common place in contemporary teaching. For N.T. parallels, *cf.* Heb. 5:12-14, where those who ought by this time to have attained maturity are admonished for not having passed beyond the milk stage, and 1 Pet. 2:2, where new converts are encouraged to acquire an appetite for the pure spiritual milk that they may grow up to full health. Paul was perhaps blamed for not giving his converts such advanced "knowledge" as some subsequent teachers had given them; his reply is that they are not yet able to digest it. But the *solid food* of which he speaks is the "secret and hidden wisdom" of 2:7; it is the fuller exposition of Christ crucified. If they treated this as "milk for babes" in comparison with the kind of knowledge for which they craved, that showed that they were still applying the standards of secular wisdom and maintaining the attitude of "men of the flesh."

On what grounds does Paul put these Christians on a par with ordinary men without Christ? While there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and

behaving like ordinary men? (3). [Jealousy and strife are included in the works of the flesh in Gal. 5:20. Men of the spirit ought to have got rid of such things. Jealousy was rife in the church at Corinth. They were constantly looking over their shoulders at one another, envying the gifts of others. There was little love at Corinth, only competitiveness. Partisanship was consonant with the wisdom of men (the leading philosophical schools of Greece invoked the names of their founders and chief teachers), but not with the mind of Christ. There was no appreciation of the different contributions brought under God by people like himself and Apollos -- only breaking off into cliques and refusing to mix with certain people of different views.

Such behavior is puerile, says Paul. We can almost hear him mentally screaming, 'Grow up! Stop behaving like babies!' This is, in fact, how young children behave when they shout, 'I want that toy, that present,' or when they stamp their feet and say, 'I'm not going to play with you - you're not my special friend.' This is also what ordinary men, men without Christ and without his Holy Spirit, are like. As James says: 'If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth (James 3:14).

Paul regularly uses the imagery of "children" in a positive sense to reflect his own apostolic relationship with his converts. In such cases the word is always *teknon* ("child") (1Thess. 2:7, 11; 1 Cor. 4:14-16; 2Cor. 6:13; Gal. 4:19; Phil. 2:22; v Phlm. 10_. The word used here is *nepios* ("*baby*" or "*mere infant*"), and it is used almost always in a pejorative, and refers to thinking or behavior that is not fitting.

Not only could he not address them as "spiritual," but they were in fact quite the opposite - "fleshly." For those whose spirituality had denigrated present physical existence to the point of denying a future bodily resurrection (15:12), this word can only be biting irony. For this reason the translation "worldly" (NIV) is unfortunate, and misses Paul's own change of words in v. 3. The word used here emphasizes especially their humanness and the physical side of their existence as over against the spiritual.

Some conclude from this that it is okay to be carnal Christians. There is no question that Paul considers his Corinthian friends to be believers, but he also considers that they are in fact acting otherwise. His concern is to get them to change, not to allow that

such behavior is permissible since not all Christians are yet mature. Paul's language is ironical, not permissive.

There is a book entitled *Carnal Christians and other words that don't go together*. It is written by Rich Wilkerson. He writes in the introduction:

To suggest that a person can be both Christian and carnal is not only incorrect but impossible. The following situations have actually happened.

A young woman told me that God led her to sleep with her boyfriend to deepen their love relationship. She said, "Of course, we have prayer and Bible study first."

A man responded to my question, "Are you a Christian?" with this answer "Well, sort of." I replied, "SORT OF? Did Christ 'sort of' die for you?"

A girl came to the altar one night boldly proclaiming her love for God. "Yes, I love God, but I hate my parents," she later said.

2. Planting and watering (3:5-8)

Paul now goes right to the heart of the matter. If you are not to boast in men but are to boast only in the cross, how are you to regard your teachers? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Asking the questions in this disdainful way, and not even saying 'Who is Apollos? Who is Paul?', Paul immediately defuses the personality-cult controversy. Some looked up to one, some to the other: but Paul is quite clear -- we are both servants, *diakonoi* (= deacons). We wait at table to serve you; we wait on God for his instructions. As we obey his wishes, so you are blessed. We move at his bidding. He has assigned to us our responsibilities.

I planted, Apollos watered (6). Both activities are vital. Each depends on the other. It is no good one planting seeds where the other cannot water them, and the one who waters does not achieve much if he waters everywhere else except where the seeds have been sown. Both functions are important, but useless unless God gives the growth. Both he who plants and he who waters are completely dependent on God and on each other: 'God's fellow workers' (9), equal in his sight and equal in value (8). They are servants, not partners. Both need to work hard and both can expect to be rewarded at the end (cf. 14): each shall receive his wages according to his labor (8). Each shall be paid

his appropriate wage on the "day of Christ" (*cf.* 3:13; 4:5).

This emphasis on serving is crucial for recovering a biblical perspective on leadership. Jesus taught precisely the same: 'Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves (Luke 22:24-27). Division, rivalry, jealousy arise in the church because certain leaders lord it over the flock and God's people often love to have it so; it is less demanding, less disturbing. Authority in the church, truly Christian authority, comes from those who lay down their lives for their brethren in service and availability. Any other authority is worldly authority and is to be rejected.

Although the major thrust of these verses is to diminish the importance of individual leaders, it is worth pointing out that Paul does not fall into the trap of dismissing the parts played by Apollos and himself as irrelevant. Indeed, he stresses that through the ministry both of himself and of Apollos the Corinthians had come to faith in God (5), servants through whom [not in whom] you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. They are insignificant compared with God himself, 'who gives the growth' (7), but they are vital to the divine scheme of things. Each has his distinctive work to do and that work requires strenuous toil (*cf.* 15:10) for him, as indeed it does for every Christian (15:58). So each individual's contribution to the work of God is essential: Paul forbids the man either to assert himself against the community or to merge himself into it.

If this is the proper way to understand the ministry of those entrusted with leadership in God's church, then let the Corinthians stop saying 'I belong to Paul' and 'I belong to Apollos' -- the emphasis falls on the personal pronoun in these phrases. Both Paul and Apollos are gifts from God to the church at Corinth and are to be received as such.

3. Foundations and buildings (3:9-17).

In verse 9 Paul switches from an agricultural to an architectural metaphor: *You are God's field, God's building*. A building needs both a foundation and a superstructure. Just as God gave him the task of planting the seed of the gospel in the hearts of the Corinthians, so God in his grace enabled him to lay the foundation for a strong church at Cor-

inth. It was Paul's policy not to build on another man's foundation (Rom. 15:20).

Paul likens himself to a skilled master builder, one who brings all his experience and knowledge to the work and assigns tasks to individual workmen. The Greek word gives us the English 'architect' and it is obvious, most of all to the architect himself, that he cannot do everything and that he depends on the skill, the craftsmanship, the sheer hard labor of many other fellow-workers. Paul has done his particular job: he has laid the foundation, by clearly proclaiming Jesus Christ and him crucified (2:2). His reason for doing that was to ensure that the faith of the Christians at Corinth rested securely in the power of God on Jesus himself, the only sure foundation (*cf.* 2:5 and 3:11).

It may be that "another man" to whom reference is made is not Apollos since no exception to the watering of Apollos was taken while there is some more critical note in the references to building on the foundation Paul had laid. There may even be an oblique reference here to the Peter-party who could have been relying on Peter, the rock, as the foundation of the church. [There is a hint of the same possibility in Paul's description of his confrontation with Peter, James and John in Gal. 2, where he mentions these three apostles as "reputed to be pillars" (2:9).] In any event care must be exercised over the quality of the material and workmanship that go into building on the foundation.

Once the foundation has been securely laid, the building must go up. Paul laid the foundation, and another man is building upon it (10). Indeed, several people are involved in building the church at Corinth and Paul is concerned all the way through this letter that the church should be built up in faith and love. That is the explicit thrust of chapters 8, 10 and 14; but it is the heartbeat ν of the whole letter.

Some in Corinth were talking as though Paul himself was the foundation-stone of their church life, but no human being can sustain the life of any church or any Christian. Elders and preachers move on and die: only a church built on Jesus Christ survives. Paul assures them that the only foundation that can be laid for the church is Christ himself, and that was the foundation which Paul had laid at Corinth with his preaching of "Jesus Christ and him crucified. "The concept of Christ as the foundation - natural in itself - was strengthened in the early church by the use of Isa. 28: 16 (Behold I am laying in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tested stone. . .") frequently conflated with other "stone" passages

in the O.T., as a testimony of Christ (*cf.* Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:6). No one else, whatever the meaning of his name, could fill this role.

It is common to interpret verses 12-15 in terms of an individual Christian's quality of life as revealed on the Day of the Lord. In its context Paul is, in fact, describing the quality of workmanship done by those contributing to building up the church at Corinth. Let each man take care how he builds (10) - both Apollos and Peter, the local leadership, and indeed anyone involved in the life of the church at Corinth.

The quality of the foundation could not be disputed, but the state of the building depended on what was erected on this foundation. Was the material durable, like gold silver, precious stones, or combustible, like wood, hay, stubble? In a fire which broke out suddenly and spread rapidly through one of those ancient cities, structures of durable material would survive with little damage, while wooden shacks would go up in smoke. Paul had taught his converts the y basic truths of the gospel. What kind of teaching had others given them? Was it teaching that would stand the fiery test of persecution? Above all, was it teaching that would stand the searching test of final judgment on the Day? The quality of the material and the workmanship alike would then be shown for what it really was: the faithful servant would receive a reward, while faulty workman ship would be consumed and the worker would suffer loss.

Paul sees the day coming (*cf.* 1:8) when the true nature of every Christian's work will *become manifest* (13) and be plain for all to see, *because it will be revealed with fire*. That fire *will test what sort of work each one has done, i.e., its quality*. It will not be a matter of how successful, or effective, or popular, or commended by men. The materials used will be exposed: will they turn out to be *gold, silver and precious stones*? Or will they actually be nothing but *wood, hay and straw*? Will the work of Christians in Corinth prove to be what God has done by his Spirit, or what men have erected in their own resources, for their own benefit and glory? It is easy to cover up the materials of which a building is made, so that it looks sturdy as well as impressive. The Day will disclose it. (*cf.* Mal 3:1ff; 2 Thess 1:6-12).

If we are involved, therefore, in building up the life of God's church, we need to pray both that our good resolutions and our acts of faith may be impregnated with the

power and grace of God, and that our motivation may be solely that the name of Jesus Christ may be glorified. If that is the character of our Christian service, we shall receive a reward (14). No doubt every Christian's work is mixed in quality; no doubt we all shall have the awesome sadness of seeing much of our work burned up. This should inspire all Christians to take more thorough care how we are building. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire (15).

Those who have believed in Christ crucified for forgiveness, cleansing and eternal life need fear no condemnation, even from the holy God who knows our innermost secrets. Jesus himself has said: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life' (John 5:24). These verses in 1 Corinthians 3 urge us to take with full seriousness both the certainty of eternal life and the scrutiny which the Lord will bring to our daily service as Christians. He is passionately concerned for the church, his building (9): it is his temple; his Spirit dwells in the church (see Eph. 2:22), in each local church (16). It is not surprising, therefore, that he is prepared to destroy anyone who uses his God-given talents to suck the life out of his church, to destroy God's temple (17). (*cf.* James 4:5). The temple of God can be destroyed or defiled by party-spirit and quarrelling, so let them beware; the punishment for such sacrilege will fit the crime (*cf.*, 11:30).

This is both a warning and an encouragement: God's temple is holy because his Spirit dwells in it, just as the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem were holy because his "name" or his "glory" dwelt there, and that temple you are (17). God will not let anyone maltreat, let alone destroy, his own living temple without answering for that conduct. Therefore we must not let anyone abuse us, nor must we abuse ourselves. God's Spirit dwells in you (16), *i.e.*, all members of the church together as the body of Christ (at Corinth or anywhere). Later, Paul will be stressing that God's Spirit dwells in each Christian's actual body, that this is also 'a temple of the Holy Spirit' (6:19). As we shall see, the practical implications of that truth for personal purity are equally penetrating.

Since v. 5 Paul has been trying to correct the Corinthians' false view of church leadership, by redirecting their focus from the teachers themselves to God, who owns all

and whose alone they are. At the same time, he must correct their understanding of the nature of the church itself. He takes the imagery of vv. 9b-15 a step further by specifying the kind of building that he and the others have been erecting, namely God's temple in Corinth. With this imagery he does two things: (1) he tried to help the Corinthians to see the nature and significance of their being God's people in Corinth, and (2) by picking up the imagery of judgment from vv. 13-15, he sternly warns those who are in process of destroying the church by their divisions. Thus he presents us with remarkable imagery describing the nature of the local church, as well as with the strongest warning in the NT against those who would take the church lightly and destroy it by worldly wisdom and division.