

January 26, 2025 (Lesson 9)

GOD'S VISION FOR THE CHURCH

1. **The Church—God's Field** (1 Corinthians 3:1-9)
2. **The Church—God's Building** (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)
3. **The Church—God's Temple** (1 Corinthians 3:16-23)

Central Truth: Christian unity is an essential characteristic of a healthy local church.

Focus: Affirm that spiritual immaturity and divisiveness undermine God's vision for the local church and commit to Christian unity.

Evangelism Emphasis: Unity in a local church can draw sinners to Jesus Christ.

Golden Text: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10).

The audience to whom Paul wrote this letter was composed of members of the church in Corinth. As we will see in this unit, this church was having severe internal problems. These sharp words were addressed to believers in Christ Jesus who were not demonstrating spiritual growth or Christian maturity through a healthy life of faith. This week's lesson—which presents us with a Biblical and practical perspective on the role of ministers and the congregation—can help prevent disputes and divisions resulting from personal preferences within the church.

In 1 Corinthians 3, we find three metaphors for the church: God's field, God's building, and God's temple. Each of these metaphors compares two things that are not otherwise related. They are used to present distinct perspectives of the same truth: Christian unity is an essential characteristic of a healthy local church.

Paul concludes this chapter by distinguishing between the foolish act of trusting in human wisdom rather than in Christ. Believers in Christ possess everything needed for the present and the future. To belong to Christ is to belong to God because Christ belongs to God.

1. THE CHURCH—GOD'S FIELD

A. Immature Infighting (1 Corinthians 3:1-4)

¹ And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. ² I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. ³ For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? ⁴ For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?

Paul could not address the brethren of the church in Corinth as “spiritual” people—those who follow the example of Jesus Christ, who are filled with the Spirit, and who seek to glorify God the Father. Instead, the apostle had to speak to them as “carnal” people. Paul suggested they were like “babes in Christ” because their actions did not demonstrate maturity in their Christian experience.

Their immaturity prevented them from receiving the solid nourishment of the Word and the depth of knowledge of the faith. Regardless of the time they have known Christ, Paul appeared obligated to continue nourishing them with the same “milk” they received at the beginning of their walk in the Lord (v. 2). The author of the letter to the Hebrews expanded on this condition, which still manifests itself in the contemporary church (5:13-14).

The clear evidence that the Corinthians were carnal people or infants in Christ was the envy, strife, and divisions occurring in the church. In verse 3, the statement that the brethren were “yet carnal” denotes the idea of being “in the likeness of.” The term *carnal* describes a physical state in verse 1, while it refers to ethics in verse 3. They were “controlled by animal appetites, governed by human nature, instead of by the Spirit of God” (W. E. Vines).

According to Paul, their spiritual immaturity was evident in the believers’ interpersonal relationships. The practice of jealousy and quarreling among themselves, rather than behaving like mature Christians, made them mere humans with worldly practices (“walk as men,” v. 3). Paul named two acts that produce divisions: *envy* and *strife*. The personal preferences of some for Paul’s leadership and others for Apollos had led to carnal practices that divided the body of Christ and demonstrated spiritual immaturity (v. 4).

Our preferences for specific leadership styles can cause divisions in the body of Christ and demonstrate immaturity. Sometimes blind loyalty to a friend, preference for a person in a pastoral office or ministry, or personal fondness for a particular style of worship can lead us to act like carnal people. Even if we have been in church for many years, when we practice envy and strife or participate in divisive movements within the church, the body of Christ is hurt. Considering this evident threat, dialogue and unity are the best courses of action for those who long to be spiritual Christians.

Staying Afloat

A ship with a divided crew is destined to sink. Each crew member must work together in harmony to ensure a smooth voyage. Similarly, a church community divided by immaturity and conflict undermines God's vision. The church can stay afloat and navigate toward a more prosperous future only by committing to unity.

B. God's Fellow Workers (1 Corinthians 3:5-9)

⁵ Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? ⁶ I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. ⁸ Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. ⁹ For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building.

The Corinthian brethren erroneously understood Paul and Apollos' relationship to each other and their relationship to Christ while serving in the church. As leaders, they were not captains of opposing teams but servants ("ministers") who fulfilled their function as a result of a divine initiative (v. 5). As servants, they were instruments who brought believers to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Each of them was fulfilling the mission the Lord had entrusted to them through God's "high calling . . . in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).

Paul used the metaphor of the church as God’s field to clarify their ministerial functions and how each role provided a specific contribution to the kingdom of God. The apostle described himself a planter, while Apollos gave the proper follow-up by watering the planted seeds (1 Cor. 3:6). God is the One who caused the growth; therefore, there was no reason for competition between them.

This teaching for the Corinthian church, as well as for us today, has two fundamental truths. First, neither Paul nor Apollos, nor any other minister, should be exalted. Every believer should fix their eyes only on God—the One who gives growth (v. 7). Second, unity among the ministers and leaders of the church is essential. The function of one minister is necessary for the work of the other ministers to be carried out effectively.

Some, like Paul, have the task of sowing so others, like Apollos, can water the seeds. All the workers in the Lord’s work “are one” (v. 8). Paul leaves no room for competition, prominence, or sectarianism in the church. Regardless of a person’s function or ministry, “we are one” in Christ (John 17:22). During this process, and until its conclusion, both yesterday and today, God is the One who blesses His work, gives the harvest, and rewards each servant.

The goal is collaboration, so Paul added the metaphor of God’s building to the metaphor of His field (1 Cor. 3:9). Those who lead and build the church are coworkers, and those who make up the church are God’s building and field.

Servants and co-laborers of God, like Paul and Apollos, are called to sow the Gospel and build the kingdom of God. The Lord’s servants are neither rivals nor competitors among themselves. Therefore, allowing popular culture and business models to enter the church to supplant Biblical principles can divert us from God’s grand plan of unity and diversity. This is the approach God has designed for the Gospel to be preached, disciples to be developed, and God to be glorified. The

Lord calls His ministers, assigns their tasks, gives them growth, and rewards each according to their work.

—*Why do you suppose God calls some ministers to be “planters” and others to be “waterers”?*

2. THE CHURCH—GOD’S BUILDING

A. One True Foundation (1 Corinthians 3:10-11)

¹⁰ According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. ¹¹ For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Paul expanded on the second metaphor, God’s building, and its components to illustrate the function of each believer in the Lord’s work. First, he acknowledged that being a part of this spiritual edification project was because of “the grace of God” (3:10; 15:10). God’s grace leaves out any human merit or cause for self-exaltation, for *grace* is unmerited favor given to everyone who receives Christ.

Second, by this grace, Paul had introduced Jesus Christ to the Corinthians. The apostle had been assigned the task of a “wise masterbuilder” who “laid the foundation” (3:10). Laying the foundation was only the beginning. Others would continue to follow him, building on that foundation. This act of building is not accomplished only by apostles and ministers. By God’s grace, every believer participates in the marvelous process of constructing God’s building.

As servants and collaborators—throughout the ages, in all parts of the world—men and women have participated in the building of God’s church. Now that it is our turn, we must learn from and practice this Biblical teaching.

Every work built on this foundation must be built “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Col. 3:17 NKJV). Each believer needs to do the part of the work God has equipped them to do, with good quality. Every believer must be careful and responsible in

how they contribute to the building process. Our participation in the construction should continue in excellence and quality on the foundation already laid.

The only foundation of God's building is Jesus Christ; there can be no other foundation (1 Cor. 3:11). No one may lay another foundation for any reason. Jesus Christ is the "cornerstone" of the building of God (Eph. 2:20). It is now the task of each of us to take care how we build.

The Only One

Jesus is the only Foundation, the only sure Foundation. That's the reason we should come to Him. Nobody else has that foundation; riches don't have it; popularity doesn't have it.—William Branham

B. Building Instructions (1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

¹² Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; ¹³ Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

The use of "anyone" (NKJV) in this passage establishes that the building process is not limited to preachers and teachers. Every believer in Christ, servant, and co-laborer has been assigned to construct God's building. No one is exempt from participating in this process. Whether we know it or not, each of us either helps or hinders daily with our words, attitudes, and actions. Therefore, unity in the church is essential, with "every part [doing] its share . . . in love" (Eph. 4:16 NKJV).

The apostle further developed the building metaphor by providing examples of materials used to build God's church. The list includes six types of materials, of which three will pass the test by their quality. The other three, although used by some for building, are unacceptable because they have no strength and do not honor the quality required to build on such a significant foundation.

The three highly valuable and very durable materials are gold, silver, and precious stones. The quality of these items is irrefutable. Throughout the centuries, the most beautiful buildings around the world have used these resources. Instructions on the use of these materials should not be interpreted literally. Gold, silver, and precious stones are symbols of durability, imperishable quality, and the ability to withstand the test to which one's work will be subjected.

In contrast, the other materials mentioned—wood, hay, and straw—are flammable, weak, and perishable. These materials symbolize unacceptable work because of their poor quality and inability to withstand fire.

Paul establishes three things concerning the work of every believer in the building of God's kingdom. First, "each one's work will be made clear; for the Day will declare it" (1 Cor. 3:13a NKJV). Whatever the work is, and however it is built on the foundation, it will not be kept secret. Jesus said everything hidden will be "made manifest," and what is hidden will "come to light" (Mark 4:22 ESV).

Second, "fire will test" the type of work built by each believer (1 Cor. 3:13b NKJV). This judgment of believers through fire will reveal the work of those who built something imperishable, in contrast to those who built something so poorly that it will be devoured. This fire is not a purifying fire but, rather, a testing fire.

Third, the result of the test of each one's work is not to determine their salvation but their "reward" (v. 14), thus reiterating salvation does not result from "works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Each believer whose work passes the test of fire will receive a reward from God for their labor. However, some builders will "suffer losses" (1 Cor. 3:15) after presenting their work because it is not resistant to the test; the fire consumes it. Despite their loss, those believers will still be saved. Although the loss will be evident in that they will receive no reward, their salvation will

endure “but only as through fire” (v. 15 ESV). These people will rush through the flames to escape safely.

In conclusion, not all who build in the church will be rewarded. Therefore, let us heed Paul’s warning and instruction: “Each one should build with care” (3:10 NIV).

—*Which types of works will bring a reward, and which types will be destroyed?*

3. THE CHURCH—GOD’S TEMPLE

A. God’s Spirit Indwells His People (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

¹⁶ Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? ¹⁷ If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.

The third metaphor Paul presents in this passage is that of the church as God’s temple. Although elsewhere Paul refers to the human body as “the temple of the Holy Ghost” (6:19), here he refers to the assembly of believers as the temple of God.

This metaphor, different from the previous two (the field and the building), is strictly religious in character. It could bring to the mind of the Corinthians both the priestly world of the Old Testament and the religious world of the Greeks with their pagan temples, which flourished in Corinth.

As on other occasions, the apostle introduced this truth through a question. This question pointed to two fundamental truths. The first truth is, the church is the temple of God. God dwells amid His people. As the Lord dwelt in the midst of His people in the Old Testament (Zeph. 3:17), so God is also in the midst of the assembly of believers (Matt. 18:20). Jesus Christ is the Lord of the assembly because the church belongs to Him. The second truth is, this divine presence is dispensed through the Holy Spirit, who indwells every believer (2 Cor. 1:21-22). The presence of the Holy

Spirit in the church makes this body sacred and consecrated to the glory of God. The Spirit is the key and the crucial reality for the new life of believers in Christ.

Since this temple of God is holy, the apostle warns about the consequences that will be suffered by “anyone [who] destroys God’s temple” (1 Cor. 3:17 ESV). This was a severe warning to those who, through divisions, were corrupting the temple of God in Corinth. These immature people were defiling God’s temple with their actions and were about to receive the retribution of His wrath on their lives. The consequence was withering—God would destroy them.

Therefore, leaders and ministers, yesterday and today, have a great responsibility to care for the Lord’s temple and to “feed the flock of God” (1 Peter 5:2-3). As an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul raised his voice to protect Christ’s church. He highlighted its value and warned of the futile consequences that would be suffered by anyone who attacked this divine work.

Divine Expectation

Jesus is the Head of the church. He expects His body to cooperate.—Jack Wellman

B. Believers Belong to Christ (1 Corinthians 3:18-23)

¹⁸ Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. ²⁰ And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. ²¹ Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are your’s; ²² Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are your’s; ²³ And ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.

Paul’s tone of warning continues. Now the apostle points out the possibility that someone can be deceived not only by another person but also by themselves. His message to the church and its leaders is to avoid this behavior that harms the church. To avoid falling into this deception, believers must not follow the wisdom of this age.

The problem of believers desiring wisdom is something Paul dealt with from the beginning of his letter (1:18-31). He established that the world cannot know God through human wisdom, so God chose to save believers by the “foolishness of preaching” the Gospel (v. 21).

To escape the trap of false wisdom that leads us to see ourselves as wise, we must humbly recognize we do not know everything. We must accept the foolishness of the Gospel, which opposes “the wisdom of this world” (3:19). The world’s criteria (power, influence, intellect, money, position) should not govern the church and its ministry, because the world totally opposes the values of the kingdom of God.

God has rejected the wisdom of this age as His means for presenting the Gospel and administering the Lord’s church. Paul uses two Old Testament quotations to contrast the world’s wisdom with God’s extraordinary wisdom. These quotations are taken from the wisdom literature of the Jewish tradition. They affirm the attributes of God and His superiority over those who consider themselves wise in their own opinion. The first is taken from Eliphaz’s speech to Job: “He catches the wise in their own craftiness” (Job 5:13 ESV). God’s wisdom always overcomes the craftiness of the worldly-wise by reducing it to mere acts of foolishness.

The second quotation is taken from Psalm 94:11 to affirm this truth: “The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity.” This reference is part of a psalm of a collective lament and affirms the superiority of God’s wisdom. The thoughts of the wise of this world are vanity. With its cunning and arrogance, human wisdom does not function in the kingdom of God.

Paul concludes this section with an exhortation to focus every effort and every action on the reality that we all belong to Christ. Those who instead glory in themselves or any spiritual leader are operating in human wisdom, which offers limited options and is not led by the Spirit. When the church accepts the foolishness of the Gospel and divine wisdom, all things are within reach. There is

much more to concentrate on rather than debating which leader is better. God's wisdom opens wide paths to the knowledge and experiences of faith.

Those who boast of their human abilities are rejecting the provision the wisdom God communicated with the phrase, "for all things are yours" (v. 21). The choice of human wisdom is like an empty cistern that replaces the true source of all knowledge (Jer. 2:13).

—How can we distinguish worldly wisdom from godly wisdom?

UNITED IN CHRIST

God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, provides the church with all the necessary resources to reach maturity and the unity of His perfect will. When the church accepts the foolishness of the Gospel and divine wisdom, all things are within reach. Every believer has an active role in God's field. As co-laborers, we must build on the foundation that is Jesus Christ. Our work should honor God and bless the church, the temple where the Holy Spirit dwells. When the work of each believer is tested, those who have built with unity, faith, and devotion will receive their reward.

Our goal should be to remain united in Christ, in whom the church has everything it needs. As believers in Christ, we possess everything necessary for the present and the future. To belong to Christ is to belong to God, because Christ belongs to God.

Daily Devotions

- M. United Against Opposition (Nehemiah 4:1-4)
- T. Affirmation of Unity (Psalm 133:1-3)
- W. The Wisdom of Unity (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)
- T. Jesus' Prayer for Unity (John 17:11, 20-26)
- F. In One Accord (Acts 2:1-4)
- S. One Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 12-20)