



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 5: The Plowboy and Waterboy¹... 1 Corinthians 3:5-17

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:5**...What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw--¹³ 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. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

Now I started off our study in 1 Corinthians by giving you the general structure of the book.

Paul's introduction is short, only nine verses. He then quickly moves into the issue of the reports he had received about what was going in Corinth. He had received two reports. The first reports concerned the fact of divisions. We have been talking about that report for a number of weeks now.

In a few weeks I hope to just touch on the second report, the one dealing with gross immorality.

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Now in dealing with the issue of divisions, the Apostle Paul asked three important questions.² He then proceeded to answer the questions in the reverse order that he asked them. We have already looked several times at the chiasmic structure of both questions and Paul's answers. The questions are located in 1 Corinthians 1:13. In previous lessons, we noted how Paul answered the last two questions. In particular, we noted that Paul spent a good deal of time pointing out that the Corinthians misunderstood true wisdom. This morning we are going to examine Paul's answer to the first question, the focal point of his concern for the dissension that was occurring among the Corinthians.³ As we do we are going to see that they also misunderstood the nature of the relationship between their leaders.⁴

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ESV 1 Corinthians 1:12...What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

By the order of the questions and the context immediately preceding the asking of the question, I think we can determine that the main focus of Paul's concern was the ongoing division among the Corinthians. Paul returns now in 1 Corinthians 3:5 to a discussion of that concern. Some scholars believe that the Corinthians were torn between Paul and Apollos. They speculate when Apollos followed Paul at Corinth and began to build upon his work that some of the members in the church began to separate into factions preferring Apollos' style and eloquence over Paul's simplicity.⁵ I have mentioned that point before and it does seem to make sense although there is no evidence from the text that Apollos himself had any thing to do with establishment of an Apollos group or faction.⁶ Paul certainly does not seem to be implying that at all.⁷

Still there were factions. Some scholars think that other leaders had begun to exert their own agendas apart from the ministry of either Paul or Apollos. Such scholars think that Paul chose to ignore their desire for preeminence and simply used himself and Apollos as examples of the kind of but that hoping to achieve that agenda they felt a need to disparage both the ministries of Paul and of Apollos.

That view also seems to make a lot of sense.

Certainly it is a characteristic of the human heart to disparage anyone who has gone before us. I do not know why we feel compelled to do that sort of thing but it is something that I have seen happen over and over again in the business world. A new manager will assume someone's position and the usual tendency is not just to attack the job with gusto but also to attack the previous manager's work and effectiveness.

I can't tell you how many times I have heard someone say, **"You won't believe what I found after he left!"** or **"I had to change his whole way of doing things after he left."** Or even, **"Well it is a good thing I came along when I did or else the whole thing would have fallen completely apart."**

That may indeed be what had happened at Corinth.

But for our purpose it doesn't really matter one way or another. Whether the real conflict was between the followers of Paul and Apollos or between Paul and some other unnamed ministers, the fact is that some of the Corinthians had come to believe that Paul had withheld the deeper wisdom of Christianity from them. That is why in chapters one and two, Paul felt a need to defend the content of what he preached. You will remember that Paul pointed out that he preached **"Christ, and Him crucified."** He also pointed out that though some of the Corinthians no longer viewed Paul's message as the **"wisdom of God"**, it actually contained the wisdom of God for those who had the maturity to recognize it. Paul's conclusion was not that the message he had proclaimed lack wisdom, but rather that the Corinthians, themselves, lacked the spiritual insight to recognize the primacy of **"Christ crucified"**.

Now continuing his argument against the Corinthians, Paul is going to use three different metaphors to get his point across.⁸ First, he is going to compare the church to a field. Then, he is going to compare the church to a building and then finally, he is going to compare the church to the temple.

Notice how Paul now begins to turn the focus of his concerns to the issue of division at Corinth. He does that by pointing out that both he and Paul were really nothing more than glorified farmhands. Look at verses 5 and 6.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:5**...What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

Do you see what he is asking?

Paul starts out by comparing the church at Corinth to a field.⁹ He starts by pointing out that both he and Apollos are nothing more than servants in God's field. It is true that they are the servants through whom the Corinthians believed but they are servants to whom God provided opportunity. Paul emphasizes that point in verse 6. Paul planted and Apollos watered, but it was not they who caused the growth at Corinth. It was God, Himself, Who caused the growth.

Now, in case he might have been misunderstood, Paul repeats the idea again in order to emphasize the importance of the principle he has just set forth.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:7**...So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

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Do you see what Paul is saying? It doesn't really matter who the servants are. It doesn't even matter in what order their ministries occurred. It is not about the servants or even who was first; it is about the God who caused the growth.

Paul's underlying assertion is that the Corinthians disapproval with Paul might be pointed directly at Paul but is really pointed more indirectly at God, Himself. I have to tell you I think this particular point is very important for God's people to remember. You see the truth is...it is pretty easy to become disappointed with church leaders...now, I don't just mean church leaders here at GCPC...no I mean church leaders everywhere. It is easy, especially in our culture, to cast too much confidence in them...to associate a bit of "hero worship" with such men...but the truth is...that even though church leaders may be gifted...may be gifted with important gifts to build up the body...they are not in and of themselves anything to brag about. No, they have the same genetic disposition to sin...they have the same flaws and foibles as the people they serve. We can play like it isn't true...but it is and it is only by God's grace and mercy and superintending hand that their flaws aren't even more apparent than they are.

While Paul doesn't view the ministers who ministered to the Corinthians as anything special, he does view them as united. They are not competitors; they are partners...like farmhands. Listen to the way he says it in verse 8:

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:8**...He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

He even goes on to say that each man will receive his reward according to the faithfulness of his own work. He explains that each man is evaluated for what he has done. Now the underlying premise is, of course, that Paul had been faithful in discharging his duties to the Corinthians and so had Apollos, but it remained to be seen if the Corinthians themselves who were fighting over which men to follow could be viewed as faithful.

At any rate, Paul views both he and Apollos as fellow workers with God. He is not implying that he and Apollos are in any way equal partners with God. He is implying rather that Paul and Apollos are fortunate to be part of God's use of secondary means to accomplish His purpose in Corinthians.

His point is that it is an honor to serve in any capacity in God's work...and servants ought to appreciate the nobility of the tasks they are undertaking.

There is a wonderful story about Sir Christopher Wren, who built St. Paul's cathedral in London. He is reported to have walked up to three men who were cutting stone for the cathedral and asked them what they were doing. The first said that he was earning a living, the second said he was cutting stone, and the third said, "**I am helping Sir Christopher Wren to build this great cathedral.**"¹⁰

In verse nine he introduces a different metaphor to explain the role he and Apollos had among the Corinthians. He switches from the metaphor of the church at Corinth as a field to the church at Corinth as a building.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:8**...He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

Now imagine for a moment the importance of this analogy. Corinth had been destroyed and rebuilt many times in its long and checkered history. In Paul's day it was a bustling thriving metropolis. It was enjoying all the growth and vitality of a new, thriving community. But it would have also had some of the problems of a new city as well. There would have been enormously expensive new homes and there would have been plenty of shanty shacks as well. There would have

been homes that were constructed out of the most expensive materials money could buy and there would have been plenty of “cardboard shacks” as well. There would have been houses that would endure for the next couple of centuries and there would have been temporary dwellings for the poorest of refugees that would last for only the next few weeks or maybe even hours. It would probably be better for us to think of Corinth in terms of a place like Mexico City or San Paulo, Brazil than of a place like Los Angeles. There would have been plenty of opulence and there would have been plenty of squalor. There would be places with fantastic adornments and multiplied servants and there would have been areas with open sewage and begging children. It would have been a place of obvious contrast.

Paul is calling upon the Corinthians to think in terms of that contrast. He is reminding them that they are also a building and that he was the first builder. Look how he says it in verse 10.

ESV 1 Corinthians 3:10...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.

Notice how Paul then switches from the idea of the building to the idea of the quality of each minister's individual part in construction, Paul, himself, laid the foundation and others are building upon that foundation, Now, we know what the foundation was that Paul laid. It was Christ and Him crucified. I think we can gather from the text that Apollos came along after Paul and faithfully continued to build on that same foundation and I think we can safely assume that Paul was concerned about the quality of the work or construction that was being added to God's building in Corinth.

It is almost as if he is saying, "I laid a solid foundation and Apollos built well upon that same foundation, but look what they are doing now to God's building." That is why, I think, he adds the warning to the current ministers at Corinth.

ESV 1 Corinthians 3:10...Let each one take care how he builds upon it.

This is a sobering thought for any minister. It is a charge to consider the quality of our work because God, Himself, considers the quality of his work.

ESV 1 Corinthians 3:11...For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw--¹³ 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.

Paul reminds the Corinthians here that the foundation of the church must be Christ and from what we have seen already in his letter it must be Christ and Him crucified. Every minister who works on God's building build upon it. But every minister has the choice of what kind of construction he may build. Paul illustrates his point by describing different types of building material.

ESV 1 Corinthians 3:12...Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw--

It was an analogy that the Corinthians would have been accustomed to seeing. Imagine what those days in Corinth must have been like. Strolling through the bustling streets of that great city one must have been accosted by the enormous diversity of sights, smells and sounds. In parts of the city there would have been magnificent houses and temples. There would have been pavement and flowers

and opulence. In other parts of the city there would have been people living in virtual squalor; there would have been people living in conditions that we can scarcely fathom. The poorest of the poor would have used whatever building material was available. The contrast would have been unmistakable: marble or mud, gold or twigs, stone or straw. Paul is using the image and relating it the kind of material that the current ministers in Corinth were using.

It was a clear illustration of his point regarding the content of their teaching. It is point that of illustration that I can understand very well. When I was a boy, I used to spend large points of each summer living with my grandfather. He lived in an old house in the country not too far from Tyler. His house was old but it was sound. It was modest but it kept out the rain; it was a typical country farmhouse. I remember it so vividly because it had no indoor plumbing. The lighting was pretty simple too. Each room had a wire hanging from the ceiling with a bulb on the end, with a pull-string to turn the light off or on. There were no outlets or wall plugs in the house. Though my parents lived in a modest, frame house in Arlington. It was always a bit of shock to visit my grandfather. But because I was young, the difference made quite an impression.

But my grandfather had a friend; his name was Bidy Nipp. Bidy lived about a quarter of a mile from grandfather. He had 5 or 6 kids and they lived in a tarpaper shack. It was literally just that. It was made by driving poles, really just long fence posts, into the ground and wrapping them with tarpaper to keep out the rain. The roof, if you could call it that was corrugated tin. There were adequate holes to let in air and light and just about any other creature that wanted to come in. The floor was made out of dirt. I remember visiting Bidy with my grandfather and going into his house. There were mattresses lying around

the room on the dirt floor. There were no interior walls. It was what would call today “squalor”.

Now, I tell that story not because it tells you something about the world I grew up in, but rather because it illustrates what Paul is saying. When my grandfather died, my dad and I eventually tore down his house. The interior wall was made of two by six studs. But the builder had not just put sheetrock on top the studs. Underneath the sheetrock there were two by ten inch boards running horizontally. They were rough cut but they had lasted for over a hundred years when we tore the house down. My dad and I incorporated much of the lumber into his new house. On the other hand, when Bidy died and his family moved away. His house just fell apart. Within just a year or two, the poles supporting the walls rotted off in the ground and just fell down. Within five years, you could no longer tell there had ever been a house there.

That is the point that Paul is making.

The endurance of the church is based largely upon the quality of the work being built upon it. The foundation is solid and will last for all eternity but the individual building of each generation must be evaluated by that generation. If the material is no good, the work of that generation will have to be evaluated and inspected and rebuilt according to the need. That is the point Paul is making in verse 13.

ESV 1 Corinthians 3:13... 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.

Now you can imagine, I think, what an ancient city like Corinth must have been like. With all the shanties scattered about the city, there would have always been the ever-present danger of fire and they occurred often in the ancient world. When they did occur, they were almost always devastating. Conflagration would sweep through the poorer parts of the city and everything in its path would be destroyed. But in the better parts of the city, houses would be built out of stone or marble and the roofs would be built out of tile or slate and would resist flying sparks or embers. The houses of poorer quality would disappear and the quality houses would be left standing. That is the picture that Paul is painting.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:14**...If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.

Now, I think it is important that we should evaluate what Paul means by “fire”. Some scholars have put forth the idea that Paul is talking about tribulation and certainly it is easy to see how they come with that. The Bible often speaks about the idea of suffering or difficulty as being related to fire. If that were the case, Paul would be saying, “When tribulation comes, we will be able to evaluate the quality of our ministries. We will be able to tell whether the stuff we built with was of an enduring quality.”

Other scholars say that this is a reference to the Day of the Lord, the day in which the Lord, Himself appears. His appearance alone will reveal the quality of the work. Listen to the way Calvin says it:

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“It is proper that we give the name “day” to the time when darkness and obscurity are dispelled, and the truth is brought to light. Hence the Apostle

forewarns us, that fraudulent works in the Lord will not always remain a secret, nor will those who have conducted faithfully always be unknown...that is, "The darkness will not always remain: the light will one day break forth and will make all things manifest." That day will be the Day of the Lord but the metaphor is more elegant if you read simply the word "day" by itself because Paul in this way conveys the idea, that the Lord's true servants cannot always be accurately distinguished from false workmen, inasmuch as virtues and vices are concealed by the darkness of the night. That night, however, will not always continue. For ambition is blind - man's favor is blind - the world's applause is blind but God sees everything and will dispel the darkness that surrounds things whenever He chooses...

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Paul...now also applies metaphorically the name of fire to the very touchstone of doctrine...the fire, then means the Spirit of the Lord, who tries by his own criteria what doctrine resembles gold and what resembles stubble. The nearer the doctrine of God is brought to this fire the brighter it shines. While that which has its origin in man's head will quickly vanish, the same way stubble is consumed in the fire. Not only will those things which vain ambition, like a dark night, concealed among the Corinthians be brought to light by the brightness of the sun, but they will also be burned like so much trash."¹¹

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Paul is saying the revelation of God, will reveal what is good and what is bad. It will reveal what is true and what is false. That is why in verse 16 he uses the metaphor of a temple.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:16**...Do you not know that you are (ἐστε) God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you (ὑμῖν)? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you (ὑμεῖς) are (ἐστε) that temple.

Do you see what he is saying here? He is saying that the church in Corinth is God's temple. The "you" in verse 16, is a plural pronoun. It is not that the individuals are not temples of the Holy Spirit, Paul will make that point later in the book. It is, rather, that the whole church is God's field, God's building, God's

temple. Each and every minister is a builder and he has his choice of materials to build with. He can build with the gospel or he can build with “worldly wisdom”...“sophia”.¹² He may focus on less important things and be assured that the revelation of God will reveal his handwork for what it is. Or, he may focus on Christ and Him crucified and ultimately see his work survive.

In particular, those that bring about division or schism should know that they are not only building without proper materials; they are in fact destroying the building of others. You can see Paul’s seriousness here:

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 3:17**...If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

God takes His church seriously. He takes the holiness of His church seriously. If any man seeks to destroy it through contention of divisiveness he had better know that God, Himself, will take offense and will act to protect His temple. The reason that God will take offense is given in the last half of verse 17:

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 3:17**... and you are that temple.

You see Paul is calling to their mind the OT temple.¹³ He is alluding to the fact, that God’s temple was holy. The reference to the word **“temple”** and the reference to **“gold, silver, and precious stones”** would have made that abundantly clear to the Corinthians. In the same way that God judged Nadab or Abihu¹⁴ for any of the other hosts of people that He judged for not taking His temple to be holy, God will in the same manner judge those who destroy His church through careless or reckless abandon.

So, if I could sum up. Paul is saying that he and Apollos took care to build rightly in Corinth. The ministers that were there now were also responsible for how they were building. If they were, in fact, spreading dissension and dividing the church, their works would be revealed by God's revelation in due course. If they were destroying God's temple, they should expect judgment of the utmost severity.

Now, in closing I think it might be helpful to try to make some sort of application.

First, the way our church will be evaluated by God, is not going to be based upon the quality of the church plant we build here at GCPC. The thing that will last, ultimately last is not the building itself, but the gospel of Christ and Him crucified as we proclaim it faithfully.

Secondly, all of us should take care of starting or being involved in dissension. It is not that there is no place for dissension, I believe that church is in need of and will always be in need of reform. I am not for unity at any cost. What I am for, indeed what I think the Apostle Paul is for, is keeping our willingness to fight restricted to the central topic of Christ and Him crucified. Another way, to say that is we should limit our willingness to fight to issues that are worth fighting about. We should take care to avoid separation and division over secondary issues, especially since the gospel and in particular the truth of Christ's imputed righteousness covering sinners has fallen on such hard times in our world today.

Let's pray.

¹ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Raids: Baker Books, 2003), 111. Dr. Garland's phrase is just too good to pass up.

² NIV **1 Corinthians 1:13**...Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

³ The point seems obvious enough. Paul takes 4 verses to answer the last question...e.g. "Was Paul baptized for you?" He takes 30 verses to answer the question before that...e.g. "Was Paul crucified for you?" And he takes 39 verses to answer the first question, "Is Christ divided?"

⁴ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the first Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1953), 56. He writes, "The Apostle has shown that the dissensions are rooted in a misconception of the gospel message, akin, in most cases to that of the Greeks, who seek wisdom in the low sense of cleverness of the Greeks, in other cases, to that of the Jews, who are ever seeking a sign. He goes on to trace the dissensions to a second cause, viz. a perverted view of the office and function of the Christian ministry."

⁵ Donald P. Ker, "Paul and Apollos—Colleagues or Rivals?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 77.01 (2000): 96-7.

⁶ Joop. F. M. Smit, "What Is Apollos? What Is Paul? In Search of the Coherence of First Corinthians 1:10-4:21." *Novum Testamentum* 44, no. 3 (2002): 242-3. Smit believes that Paul simply included the name Peter in order to soften the rebuke to the followers of Apollos.

⁷ Smit, 238. Smit seems to think that the word "destroy" may be a veiled hint toward Apollos. He writes: "At first sight no connections exist between the text block (3:5-4:21) in which the theme 'division' and the one (1:18-3:4) in which the theme 'wisdom' is discussed. After the mention of the names in 1:12 nothing else refers to the question 'Apollos' until the repetition of the two messages of support in 3:4: "The one says: I am of Paul, and the other: I am of Apollos." The intervening block seems dedicated exclusively to the theme of wisdom. At closer inspection, however, 1:18-3:4 does contain a positive reference to the question 'Apollos' and that right at the beginning in 1:18-19.

In the opening lines of his exposition on the paradoxical wisdom of God, Paul twice uses the verb ἀπόλλυμι. First he mentions ἀπολλυμένοις ("those who are perishing") (v. 18). Next, by means of a quotation from Scripture beginning with ἀπολώ he elucidates who are concerned. In this quotation God is saying: "I will destroy (ἀπολω/) the wisdom of the wise and the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate" (v. 19). Does Paul allude here to the name of Apollos? Or, more precisely, is ἀπολλυμένοις an allusion to the adherents of Apollo; the 'Apollinist' so to say, and ἀπολω to the name of their revered leader?"

⁸ Smit, 238.

⁹ The most common translation in the OT for this particular word is "vineyard". Cf. Fee, Footnote 11, 131. He quotes there from a work by Riesenfeld.

¹⁰ The story is legendary and told several different ways. No particular source.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Commentary to First Corinthians* in Calvin's Commentaries Volume XX (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1981), 138.

¹² Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1987), 142.

¹³ Fee, 140.

¹⁴ ^{NIV} **Numbers 3:1**...This is the account of the family of Aaron and Moses at the time the LORD talked with Moses on Mount Sinai. ² The names of the sons of Aaron were Nadab the firstborn and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. ³ Those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests, who were ordained to serve as priests. ⁴ Nadab and Abihu, however, fell dead before the LORD when they made an offering with unauthorized fire before him in the Desert of Sinai. They had no sons; so only Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests during the lifetime of their father Aaron.