

# 1 Corinthians 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 03 July 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] 1 Corinthians chapter 3 1 Corinthians chapter 3 1 Corinthians chapter 3 1 Corinthians chapter 3 1 Corinthians chapter 3 and Christ is God's.

Paul ended chapter 2 of 1 Corinthians by speaking of the contrast between the natural and the spiritual person and the way that the spiritual person, the person who has the spirit of God and the mind of God in Christ, has perception that natural persons lack.

Indeed, the spiritual person can judge all things while being judged by no one. Yet, beginning in chapter 3, Paul circles back to the problem he had highlighted at the beginning of this section in chapter 1 verses 10 to 12.

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. 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.

[ 3 : 25 ] As long as the Corinthians think and act in such a way, they cannot be addressed as spiritual people. They haven't grasped the mind of Christ and his wisdom, but need to be taught the most basic rudiments of the Christian faith, being given milk rather than solid food.

They aren't ready for anything more. We find a similar statement contrasting the milk of instruction for infants in Christ and solid food of wisdom for the mature in Hebrews chapter 5 verses 12 to 14. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food. For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.

But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. The sign that they are of the flesh, that they are operating as natural persons rather than persons of the spirit, is seen in the jealousy and conflict that currently marks the community.

This is precisely the way of the flesh. The flesh creates a certain sort of community, a community of competitive and conflictual status-seeking, in which people bite and devour each other, as Paul discusses in Galatians chapter 5.

[ 4 : 39 ] The flesh is naturally driven by the desire for power, natural wisdom, for status and dominance, and is as such antagonistic to the way of the spirit, which produces fruit of an utterly different character.

In Galatians chapter 5 verses 20 to 21, among the works of the flesh, Paul lists enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions and envy.

And these are the sorts of behaviours and traits that are on display in the Corinthian church, where peace and brotherly love should be prevailing. The Corinthians seem to have exalted impressions of their own maturity, but Paul punctures and deflates these in this passage.

Far from being advanced in the ways of the spirit, they haven't really begun to understand the basics. The mind of Christ is clearly something that we do not receive suddenly and fully formed. Rather, it is something that we must mature and grow in. It is a fruit that must grow within us as we sow to the spirit rather than to the flesh. The Corinthians have received the spirit, but they haven't really begun to grasp the mind of Christ that the people of God should participate in by the spirit.

[ 5 : 50 ] Indeed, they are forming sectarian camps around ministers of Christ like Paul and Apollos, taking the ministry of the undivided Christ himself as an occasion for competitive alignments.

Paul wants the Corinthians to be under no illusions about the nature of ministers like him and Apollos. They are merely servants of their master, Jesus Christ, appointed for specific tasks.

Apollos was introduced to us in Acts chapter 18, verses 24 to 28. Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

[ 6 : 58 ] You can imagine that, with a man as brilliant and learned as Paul, and a man as eloquent and charismatic as Apollos, it was entirely natural for people to form camps around them. Entirely natural, but not spiritual.

Paul and Apollos had different but complementary callings. Paul planted the seed and Apollos watered, but God was the one giving the increase. Ultimately, God's work underlies everything else. Despite diversity of labour, everything is bound together in the one God. Paul returns to this point in chapter 12, verses 4-6. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.

And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. Ultimately, amidst the diversity of different ministers and gifts, there is one God who is active in everything.

Speaking of this diversity of gifts in the church, Paul also emphasises the unity of divine activity in chapter 12, verse 11. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

[ 8 : 05 ] And here he is making a similar point in a different way. The man planting and the man watering are unified by a common purpose, and both will be rewarded by their master. They are not each working their own personal field, but they are both labouring on the same field, God's field.

They are collaborating to produce the same fruit, rather than competing against each other. They are fellow workers with God. God is working in and through them. Apollos and Paul are united expressions of God's work in the field of his church.

They have the same source and the same end. And the Corinthians, rather than pitting the ministers of the Lord against each other, should see themselves as benefiting from their collaboration as the field of the Lord.

Paul now shifts to a building metaphor. Once again, diversity of ministries is an important theme here. The ministers of the church come from the same source and serve the same end, but do so in diverse ways.

A building built by builders in rivalry with each other would not be a very good building. But nor would a building where everyone was performing exactly the same task. You need a diversity of different ministries.

[ 9 : 14 ] Paul's task was to lay the foundation as a master builder. No other foundation exists but Christ. And Paul, in this letter, is in many respects returning to inspect that foundation.

His concern to this point has been to ensure that the Corinthians are absolutely clear that Christ is the only foundation upon which to build and that the cross is the shape of this foundation.

Jesus is the Messiah who builds a new tabernacle and Paul the tent maker is, like Bezalel, a master builder working upon it. There is going to come a day of testing, revealing the quality of people's work and the foundation that they have built upon.

Each one of the Corinthians is building their part of the building with their lives. And the judgment fire of the day of testing, whether the final great day of the Lord or a great day of testing in the middle of history, is going to prove what their work truly is.

We find similar language concerning a day of judgment in the prophets. Amos chapter 7 verse 4

This is what the Lord God showed me. Behold, the Lord God was calling for a judgment by fire and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land.

[ 10 : 23 ] Malachi chapter 3 verses 2 to 3 But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like full of soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.

