



## **1 Corinthians 3:5-17**

### **“WHAT GOOD ARE MINISTERS?”**

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### **“Following Christ at City Center!”**

## **I. SERMON TEXT**

### **1 Corinthians 3:5-17 (RSV)**

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 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 equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it. For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are.

## **II. SCRIPTURE SHEET AND SERMON**

## I CORINTHIANS 3:5-17 "WHAT GOOD ARE MINISTERS?"

Answers 1:13, *Is Christ divided?* No

### 1) v.5 TWO QUESTIONS & ANSWER: THE CHURCH'S SERVANT-LEADERS/ PASTORS.

- 5 *What* then is Paul? And *what* is Apollos? Not *who* but *what*? Pastors are servants, not status symbols
- Servants Servants (*diakonoi* = table waiters) *through whom* you believed, Not *in whom*! 4:15 **Leader: servant/evangelist**
- as the Lord assigned to each. No personal credit, God assigns the chores to be done, We are not competitors
- Lk. 17:7-10, Rom. 10:14-27, "How shall they hear?"

### 2) vv.6-8 IMAGE 1: AGRICULTURE ANALOGY ON CHURCH LEADERSHIP.

Acts 18:1 (Paul), 18:17 (Apollos)

#### a) vv.6-7 The Picture Of A Garden: The Relative Unimportance Of Workers.

- 6 I planted, 2 Cor. 9:10, No lone rangers/superstars, Church is a local, organic community
- Farmers 2 Apollos watered, Advance the work, Apostles as plow boys, water boys: both necessary
- 3 but God gave the increase. Ps. 127:1, **Picture No. 1: Church = God's field**
- 7 1' So neither is he who plants anything, Fruitless, useless apart from God, proper proportion
- 2' nor he who waters, *plant, water* are aorists, *gives* is imperfect (continuing)
- 3' but God who gives the increase (is everything). God is source of success, Isaiah 5:1-7
- Real miracle/mystery is fruit/growth! God as life-force

#### b) v.8 Test And Reward: Focus On Individual's Labor.

No complacency

- 8 Now the one who plants and the one who waters are equal (i.e. one), Complementary, co-workers
- and each shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. No turf battles, wrong audience
- It is God who finally evaluates, *Testament of Abraham* 13:11-14 on reward

### 3) v.9 ANALOGIES APPLIED TO LEADERS AND THE PEOPLE.

- Fellow-Workers No clergy turf battles! **Leader: Fellow-Workers**
- 9 For God's we are, fellow workers (*sunergoi*/ synergists); //v.5, I Thess. 3:2 on Timothy
- Work in progress, The church, leaders and people, belongs to God
- God's (cultivated) field, //vv.6-8, Ex. 15:17, Jer. 1:10. 12:14-16 on these two images
- God's building are you. vv.10-15, //1QS 8.5, 11.7-8 **Picture No. 2: Church = God's building**
- All belongs to God: God's workers, field, building!

### 2') vv.10-15 IMAGE 2: ARCHITECTURAL ANALOGY ON CHURCH LEADERSHIP.

#### a) vv.10-11 The Picture Of A Building And Architect: The Importance Of Quality.

- 10 According to the grace (*charis*, gift) of God given to me, Rom. 1:5, 15:8-21, I Cor. 2:1-5, Acts 18:1-8
- Builders 1 like a wise (*sophos*) master builder (*architectos*) I laid a foundation, Is. 28:16, **Leader: Architects/builders**
- 2 and another man is building upon it. Multiple leaders are necessary
- 2' Let each man take care how he builds upon it. Warning against shoddy pastoral work
- 11 1' For other foundation can no one lay I Cor. 1:7, 23, 2:2
- than that which is laid (i.e. by God) which is Jesus Christ. 1:23, 2:3; Foundation is Christ crucified
- Solidity of the church is tested

#### b) vv.12-15 Test And Reward: Focus On Two Types Of Materials.

Ex. 35:30-36:1

- 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with: Creator of the church is also its judge, truth revealed
- (1) gold, silver, precious stones, Temples, Precious quality, Worthy of foundation/ inflammable
- (2) wood, hay, stubble (reeds), Ordinary homes, cheap, easily available/ flammable
- 13 the work of each will become manifest; 9:1, Church & leaders examined/ nothing hidden
- for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; Rom. 2:5,16; Amos 5:18
- what sort of work each has done, 2 Pt. 3:12, 2 Thess. 1:7-8, , Not punish but reveal
- the fire will test it. Cataclysm coming! Day of the Lord, 2 Thess. 1:7-8, Mal. 4:1-2a, 2 Pt. 3:7,12
- 14 (1') If anyone's work survives which he has built, he shall receive a reward. *Testament of Abraham* 13
- 15 (2') If anyone's work shall be burned down, he shall suffer loss (i.e. be fined). See James 3:1 on judgment
- (Though he himself shall be saved, but only as through fire.) Real loss but still saved, Amos 4:11
- Wait for God's judgment, 1 Cor. 4:5, 2 Cor. 5:10, Rom. 2:6-10

### 1') vv.16-17 TWO QUESTIONS & ANSWER: THE HOLINESS & VALUE OF COMMUNITY.

- 16 a *Do you not know* that you (pl. "you all") are God's temple? 6:19, *Naos*, **Picture No. 3: Church = inner temple**
- b and that the Spirit of God dwells in you ("all of you," plural)? Spirit dwells in Christ's community!
- 17 c If any one the temple of God destroys, 6:19-20, Theat/curse of God on division/schism
- c' destroyed he will be by God. How we treat community is how God will treat us
- b For God's temple is holy (i.e. set apart), Mt. 16:18, The church belongs to God! not pastors, not people!
- a' and that temple you (plural) are! Now the *Naos* = inner part, 2 Cor. 6:16, Eph. 2:21, We are where God is working
- Leaders are for the well-being of the church which is finally under God's protection

## WHAT GOOD ARE MINISTERS?

*"... what sort of work each has done, the fire will test it."*

One day truth will be disclosed; there will be no second opinions.

### I C O R I N T H I A N S 3 : 6

**R**ichard Jackson had a long, fruitful tenure at North Phoenix Baptist Church, including over 20,000 baptisms. Jackson attributed his success to loving people and centering his ministry on reaching the lost. He also acknowledged the counsel of his pastor-father, "Son," he said, "if you love the people and preach, they'll forgive half your mistakes; if you keep the baptistery water hot, they'll forgive the other half."<sup>1</sup>

Pastors get laughed at; sometimes we deserve it because we do stupid stuff. People also project all sorts of expectations onto the symbolic role of pastor, which is Greek for *shepherd*. We're a blank screen for unresolved issues and bizarre ideas about God. At ordination a question should be added, "Are you willing- from time to time- to be a lightning rod and get *zapped*?" Since arriving at Main Street twelve days ago I've been warmly welcomed; I've also felt like a Christmas tree. People come up with an ornament in one hand, tinsel in the other, "This would look nice here! Let's decorate the new pastor." I even found a Santa Claus costume in the office closet where my robes hang! Not a good sign! In case you haven't noticed lately, people are complicated, churches are complex, and any pastor who doesn't understand the potent symbol of their office will miss much.

So it was a few years after the church was first planted in the bustling pagan city of Corinth. Paul was dealing with a popular colleague with a different style of ministry- the eloquent Apollos. To begin his corrective teaching on what pastors are and aren't he asks a question, "*What* then is Paul? And *what* is Apollos?" Not *who*- the personality question, but *what*- the functional question. What are pastors for? What good are they? Let's find out.

### TURNING TO THE TEXT

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond McHenry, *The Best of "In Other Words,"* (Houston, TX: Raymond McHenry, 1996), 181.

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**1) v.5 A Right View Of Ministers.**

In 1995 I buried my Aunt Essie in Shelby, NC. During one of our last visits she complained her church had a bad case of *preacher religion*. My ears perked up. It takes a while for rural Baptist churches to call a new pastor, and in the interim, money and attendance were down. As a nurse she had a keen sense of diagnostics. *Preacher religion* was the name she gave the virus that sapped vitality from her church. Somewhere between a smile and a frown she said, "People trust more in the preacher than they do in the Lord."

The church at Corinth had a chronic case of *preacher religion*, of personality-based faith, which is expected because they were all new Christians in a culture in which the streets were full of philosophers, each vying for followers. What we do with sports figures, they did with teachers of religion and philosophy. Everyone had a favorite, "I belong Paul; he founded the church." "I belong to Apollos; he's a better speaker." "I belong to Peter; after all, he knew Jesus in person."<sup>2</sup> Or, as I have heard since first arriving, "I belong to Terry." "I belong to Jim." "I belong to Patty." Or, I belong to this or that TV preacher: Joel Osteen, Charles Stanley, T.D. Jakes, whoever. *Preacher religion* has been with us a long time, and-like herpes- is systemic and hard to eradicate. "I like the new guy, Pastor Phil," says one. "I'm not so sure," says another, "I hear he's a dangerous radical!" But both responses are symptoms of the same virus, what my aunt labeled *preacher religion*.

For eighteen months Paul labored in Corinth to lay the foundation of Jesus Christ and him crucified. But then- as happens with ancient apostles and Methodists, Paul left for another assignment- this time across the sea in Ephesus where he and his coworkers Priscilla and Aquila met Apollos- lately come from Alexandria. After instruction to fill the gaps in his theology, the eloquent orator was sent to Corinth to water the small garden Paul planted. Luke gives a report of his success in Acts 18: "When Apollos arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully confuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus."<sup>3</sup> Paul planted; Apollos watered; God gave the increase. Work must be done, but only God has the power of life.

The presence of the gifted Apollos revealed a negative tendency. It was only with Paul's successors and the possibility of comparison that the new disciples in Corinth began to choose favorites because of their cultural training. *Preacher religion* is vicarious faith, not faith in Christ but faith in someone else's faith. I do not read my Bible, but I'm glad the pastor does. I do not pray, but I can get the minister to pray for me. I'm glad the Stephen

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<sup>2</sup> I Cor. 1:12

<sup>3</sup> Acts 18:27b-28.

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Minster or Parish Nurse came by, but I want to see the *real* pastor. All symptoms of *preacher* religion. It's immature faith we're meant to outgrow, but maturity- unlike aging, is optional. I love it when people say, "No preacher's gonna run me off from my church!"

There were those in Corinth Paul led to Christ. Others had come to faith after his departure through Apollos' ministry. And to both groups he asked, "*What* then is Paul? And *what* is Apollos?" Not personality but function. He then answered his own question. "We are not masters/ in whom you believed/ according to our preferences," but "servants/ through whom who believed/ as the Lord assigned to each." The word *servants* refers to table waiters. We don't own the restaurant or set the menu; instead, we serve God by feeding his people. I am- for a time- head waiter at the Main Street Diner, next in a lineup that began in 1858 whose pictures are in your archives. We Methodists pass through as guest leaders for a season, but Main Street is God's banquet hall, God's field, God's temple, God's holy people, and we have to find out why we are now together and work through all the clutter to a new and clear vision. Your history is rich, your future uncertain, so there is real pressure on us both to dig deep into the gospel for fresh resources.<sup>4</sup> Greenwood needs a servant people at city center, and the question is, Will it be us? Or will God have to look elsewhere?

## **2) vv.6-9 Lessons In Agriculture.**

If you want to understand the church, says Paul, go visit Park Seed. One tills and plants; another irrigates, but the growth is all God. The church is not so much an institution or bureaucracy as an ecological and organic reality, more a farm than a factory, an alive and growing mystery.<sup>5</sup> Churching is a lot like farming. Human work and wisdom are required, but the real miracle is *the increase* that comes from the God who wants a harvest.

Speaking of himself and Apollos- and by extension of all ministers, Paul writes at the center of the passage in verse 9, "For God's we are, fellow workers; God's field, God's building are you." God delights to use pastors as co-laborers, but don't mistake it for the harvest. "We matter greatly," says Paul in verse 6, "I planted, Apollos watered...." "But we really don't matter at all," he also says in verse 7. It is God who gives the increase.

Is this a contradiction? No. At ground level, human work on a farm is impressive.

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<sup>4</sup> On discernment, see Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice For Leadership Groups* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> See Christian Schwartz, *Change Your World with Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, ILL: Church Smart Resources, 2005) for an approach to church renewal that highlight the organic or natural growth of healthy churches.

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## I Corinthians 3:5-17 ..... 7

Tractors, planters, men in overalls and fertilizer caps, long hours with an eye on a late summer harvest. But if you fly high overhead, you no longer see the human element. You see newly turned fields- brown and waiting, later green shoots, waving stalks, and finally golden grain waiting for the combines. Senate Chaplain Lloyd Ogilvie got it right when he said, "Without God we can't; without us God won't."<sup>6</sup> You figure it out! A paradox is meant to stir thinking, not provide easy alternatives.

Sweat matters in the church; steady human effort is important. A man from the city was lost in the country. He stopped a farmer who was repairing fences. Seeing the neatly sectioned field and ripening vegetables he said, "You and God have done quite a job here."

The farmer looked up, skeeted a long stream of dark tobacco juice on the city-feller's wing-tips and said, "Yea, and you should-a seen it when God had it all by *hissself*." <sup>7</sup>

Till Paul arrived there was no church in Corinth. Till I arrived in 1984 there was no United Methodist Church in Northeast Columbia. It took hard work to carve a cultivated plot out of that gnarly thicket of suburban indulgence. "I planted; Barrett Alewine watered." Farmers know doing everything right is no guarantee; forces outside human control are determinative. A sweaty farmer looking into the sky and praying for rain is a good image for this work, especially if the farmer sleeps well because it's out his control anyway. Unless God shows up, nothing happens! I love the story Rusty Stevens tells:

"As I pushed the mower round our yard, I wondered if I'd finish before dinner. Mickey, our 6-year-old, walked up, and without even asking, stepped in front of me to place his hands on the mower handle. I quit pushing. The mower quickly stopped. Chuckling at his struggle, I resisted the urge to say, 'Get out of here, kid. You're in my way.' Instead I said, 'Here, Son, I'll help you.' I leaned forward, and walked spread-legged to avoid colliding with Mickey. Suddenly, tears came to my eyes: This is the way my heavenly Father allows me to 'help' him build his church. He stoops to allow me to co-labor. Why? Because God wants me to have the privilege of working with him."<sup>8</sup>

At ground level it's clear; pastors matter greatly. Churches thrive or stagnate

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<sup>6</sup> PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 3:5-17.

<sup>7</sup> Oral tradition!

<sup>8</sup> "To Illustrate: Ministry," *Leadership*, Winter 1991, 48.

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depending on the character and competence of clergy. Leadership counts; wisdom matters.<sup>9</sup> But from the divine perspective we matter very little, so verse 7 says: “So neither is he who plants anything, nor he who waters....” For all our self-importance, pastors are puny and piddling, easily replaced as God calls another from the supply closet. The church is bigger than its leaders. We are expendable, change in God’s pocket to be spent as God chooses.

After all, how can you compare the work of turning the earth with the mystery of a seed of corn yielding a tall green stalk laden with yellow-tasseled ears? How can you compare a sermon with the miracle of conversion or the impartation of the Holy Spirit at baptism? You can’t. These are different orders of reality, the lesser connected to the greater by the grace of God alone. God will evaluate the worth of my work. God alone knows whether I have obeyed or not. Frankly, sometimes I don’t even know. Same for the one who fills this pulpit after me and picks up the tractor keys at the end of my last row. We don’t pick our fields as Methodists; we are assigned a plot and told to go work it a while. You are my next assignment, and here the stakes are incredibly high. I hope you know that and are no longer kidding yourself. So let the truths of Scripture vaccinate you against the disease of *preacher religion*.<sup>10</sup> I carry a spray bottle with me- a spiritual form of Lysol, and if I see you manifesting symptoms of this malady, I will spray you to keep you from infecting others!

## **2') vv.10-15 Lessons In Architecture.**

Since the church is part of the mystery of salvation and an article of the Creeds, no one image is sufficient. Each word-picture gives a piece of the truth, not the whole.<sup>11</sup> Thus far Paul has spoken of banquets and waiters in verse 5, plowhands and water boys in verses 6 through 8. Now in verses 10 through 15 he shifts the image a third time to architecture and construction trades. He begins with a review of his own call followed by a warning:

"According to the grace (or *gift*), like a skilled master builder (*architectos* in Greek) I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. Let each take care

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<sup>9</sup> For a recent review of leadership theories and practices, see Robert Banks and Bernice Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004). Also Gayle D. Beebe, *The Shaping Of An Effective Leader* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> On the theological meaning of itineracy, see Russell E. Richey, et. al., *Marks of Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2005), Chapter 2, “Itinerant,” 17-40.

<sup>11</sup> For the multiple images of the church in the New Testament, see Ralph Martin, *The Family And The Fellowship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1979); Paul Minear, *Images Of The Church In The New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1975).

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how he builds upon it. For other foundation can no one lay than that which is (already) laid- which is Jesus Christ."

Did you notice in verse 12 the gradation of the six materials, from the rarest and most precious (gold) down the scale to the cheapest and most common (stubble or straw)? There is a clear break between the first and second group of three. Gold, silver, and precious stones don't burn. Wood, hay, and stubble do. It is the earthquake of God's shaking and the fire of God's purging that reveals what things are made of. This is the shocking image Paul uses; this is what God will do to church leaders, what we call the ordained. All our work will be set on fire; only what is of permanent value will survive. Nothing shoddy or second rate will make it into the kingdom. I'm fifty-eight years old, soon to be fifty-nine. I may have a decade left. Hopefully more. I look back on thirty-five years of ministry with a mixture of joy and regret, proud of some things, often embarrassed by my cowardice and ignorance. The finish line is closer than ever, and I simply do not have time for petty church politics that get in the way of the mission of making and maturing more disciples. It's time to get serious.

The break between the two groups of three is determined by Paul's conviction that the Day of God's truth is ahead. God's light exposes what is hidden, while the holy fire consumes all that is combustible and cheap. The God who owns the restaurant will grade the waiters because God is a quality control officer. The God who oversees the farm will test the produce because God is a Grade A fruit inspector. God the architect will put the church to the torch to see what survives because God is a holy arsonist and not impressed by appearances. If this imagery doesn't sober you, you haven't understood it. It sobered me each time I'm tempted to give in to the still-sorry parts of my character. Hear me, Main Street, nothing shoddy and cheap will make it through the fire into the kingdom. We just don't believe God would do such a thing! We are just such nice people, and we're wrong.

As Protestants we may rightly reject the Roman doctrine of Purgatory as an interim place where sins are punished and purged, but that does not mean our work does not pass through the test of God's fire. The truth about us must be told and the value of our work publicly revealed by God before all.<sup>12</sup> Paul applies this to pastors in verse 10 through 15, and by extension- I believe, to all Christians. The two words "If anyone..." are used three times here, and *anyone* applies to us all. In the 1994 California quake an apartment building in Northridge collapsed, killing sixteen. Careless builders were taken to court and levied a

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<sup>12</sup> For the official United Methodist denial of this Roman Catholic teaching, see "The Articles Of Religion," **Article XIV: Of Purgatory** in *The Book of Discipline* 2008, 62-63. For a fresh treatment of purgatory by a Methodist, see Jerry Walls, *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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## I Corinthians 3:5-17 ..... 10

heavy fine for wrongful death.<sup>13</sup> God does the same with higher standards. Church matters; faith is for keeps; life now and destinies later are at stake. Therefore only quality materials. No cheap Christianity. No bargain basement faith. No cutting corners. *Convenience* is not a Christian virtue, and yet it the dominant concern in many churches, "Make it easy, preacher." I'm sorry; I can't do that. Christ is the organizing center of a new life.

There is some comfort here, however: we will finally know the meaning of our lives. No longer in a mirror dimly but face to face. And how can that be without pain? The love of God for sinners does not mean an absence of truth at the end about how we spent our lives. Sins are forgiven, not counted against us by God in an ultimate sense. But what is not purged in this life by the process of sanctification will be exposed to light and tested by fire, "...what sort of work each has done, the fire will test it," warned Paul. It will be a relief to know the truth and to have all the defects of moral disease removed. Less- in this case- will be more.

Verses 14 and 15 ought to make every preacher in America ask for the judgment of God now rather than later: "*If anyone's work survives which he has built, he shall receive a reward. If anyone's work shall be burned down, he shall suffer loss.*" Paul says some of us will escape with nothing but our skins, smelling like we came out of a fire sale, "Though he himself shall be saved, *but only as through fire.*" I do not want to be one of those with nothing to show except a singed soul. Life in a wasted pulpit, tickling ears and stroking saints. I want to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant." The primary job of a pastor is to point the way to Christ, then show the way in your own struggles.

Remember a principle: If it costs you little, it's not worth much to God. Putting faith in the minister is wood, hay, and stubble. Trusting Christ is gold and silver and precious stones. Planning to go church shopping if the new pastor doesn't scratch where you itch is wood, hay, and stubble. Praying for your pastor is gold and silver, emeralds and sapphires. Remember that your vows of baptism and church membership are *to Christ and his church*, not to a particular minister. If I am faithful to Christ, to the Scriptures, to the doctrinal beliefs of our church, and to my duties, then follow me now and the next one later.

When someone tells me the tragic story of how they left the church over the incompetence or shenanigans of a pastor, I'm sympathetic, sort of like a doctor who feels for his emphysema patient who continues to suck unfiltered Camels. But before a pastor failed them, they already had the virus of *preacher religion*. "Yes," I say, "I know you were disappointed, but what does that tell you about where your faith was misplaced?" "How has sucking Camels landed you on oxygen?" May God give us grace to build on the foundation of Christ, and only with the quality materials of changed lives.

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 56.

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## **I Corinthians 3:5-17 ..... 11**

### **1') vv.16-17 The Immense Worth Of The Church.**

Thus far Paul has given us three images for the church: 1) the church as God's banquet hall with pastors as waiters, 2) the church as farm with the pastors as field hands, and 3) the church as construction site with the pastors as architects and builders. In verse 16 he adds a fourth image: the church as God's temple, God's dwelling place.

In the ancient world a temple was not a place of worship so much as the house the deity inhabited. They were also depositories of wealth, akin to modern banks. Two ways the wealth was protected was by a small army of mercenaries who acted as security police or by a curse invoked on any who dared violate the temple, sometimes both! In other words, If the police don't get you, God will!<sup>14</sup> It's the same reason we take an oath in court that ends with the invocation *so help me God*. The temple of justice also needs divine protection.

The Corinthians immediately understood Paul's imagery; their city was full of temples, and stories were often told of the horrible fates of those who brought a curse on themselves by robbing temples. Verse 17 is one of those curses, not for the temple of Aphrodite or Asclepius, but for the temple of God which is the church of Jesus Christ.

Listen friends: when you mess with the church, you touch the apple of God's eye, the bride and body of his Son, that for which blood was spilled. Critique the church. I do. If true it's OK, even welcomed. We need continual reformation. Call leaders to account. Examine finances. Question purpose. Hold it up to the measure of Scripture and its own public affirmations. But if your words are intended to hurt rather than heal, to weaken rather than to strengthen, beware, as Paul warns in verse 17, "If anyone the temple of God destroys, destroyed he will be by God." Those who seek to destroy or harm the church place themselves under a fearsome curse. Those who gossip, who talk *about people* rather than *to them*, fall under this spiritual ban because of the discord they sow, and it must stop!

There is also a parallel curse formula strategically placed in the United Methodist wedding service. Can you name it? We skip over it much too quickly. It ought to make every adulterer and man or woman with a wandering eye turn white with fear. You don't want God putting out a contract on your head. Jesus warned, "Those whom God has joined together, let no one (dare) put asunder."<sup>15</sup> That's not just good advice; it's a threat from the Almighty that is executed every time anyone undermines the marriage of another, including either of the marriage partners themselves. The union of male and female in marriage and

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Talbert, *Reading Corinthians* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Mark 10:9.

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## I Corinthians 3:5-17 ..... 12

the union of sinners with the Savior in the church are among God's finest creations, and you'd better make sure you're on the right side of both. To undermine marriage or the church is an ultimate offense, worthy of personal destruction, verse 17: "If any one the temple of God destroys, destroyed he will be by God." You do not want God as an enemy. Yes, there is always the promise of forgiveness and restoration for those who wake up and repent, but the cost of the damage is still high. The secret story of history is how God executes his wrath through hidden circumstances.

The story is told of a Greenwood County farmer who'd from his tractor shake a fist at folk on the way to church. September came, and the farmer had his finest crop ever, so he placed an ad in the paper, "God must not mean much if someone like me can prosper."

Next week another ad appeared, "God doesn't always settle accounts in September."<sup>16</sup>

All will go through the light and fire of truth-telling, and some will not make it through the furnace. Verse 17, "If any one the temple of God destroys, destroyed he will be by God." The church is not an optional extra; it's part of the package. You can't have Jesus or his amazing benefits without his mixed-bag of people. And if you are too good for the church, you are just too good for God, and I have no hope for you. Jesus loves his bride—broken and compromised as she now is, so why can't you? He died for her; the least you can do is show up on Sunday mornings! Hello? Anybody listening out there?

At the end of our lives, when the church stands before Christ, the test for pastors will be the more difficult one. Jesus' brother James wrote in his letter, "Let not many of you become teachers, *knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.*"<sup>17</sup> We've been duly notified ahead of time what the questions are. They're all in the text before us:

"Were you a servant? Did you feed the people the riches of Word and Sacrament? Did you point to Jesus Christ? Did you work hard and use quality materials? Did you compete with your colleagues or celebrate their gifts and successes? Did you teach and warn my people about what the church really is and how serious God is about having a holy and a happy people?"

Only the quality stuff survives: *faith* proved in testing, *hope* stretched by disappointments, *love* willing to suffer. All will be asked: How did you treat my church? Like a temple, or like a trash heap? As a place for tithes and offerings, or only for tips? As a place of holy commitment, or as a place of occasional convenience when you had nothing

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<sup>16</sup> Edited, W. Brown, "Making Sense of Your Faith," *Christianity Today*, 8/1/89.

<sup>17</sup> James 3:1.

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better to do or needed a wedding for your daughter? God help us. The church does not exist for clergy careers. The church does not exist to make you feel good about yourself or some other pop-psychology drivel. The church exists for God's purpose, as an outlet of his love and truth for the world in Jesus Christ. We are accountable to a higher purpose. Every now and then each of us preachers needs to hear Jesus say, "Take your hands off my bride."<sup>18</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

Wendell Berry is a Kentucky farmer and author. In an interview with *Blue Grass Magazine*, he proposes that community is a commonwealth of values. Although there is a lot of sentimental talk about community these days, Berry observes that building and maintaining communities requires tremendous commitment:

"Community in the real sense is a commonwealth. It's a holding in common of many different things of value.... It seems to me we belong to each other and to God. If that's accepted, there are many practical things you are committed to do. You see that nobody goes hungry, for instance. You see that nobody sleeps in the streets. You see that children are taught- not just enough to get them a job or get them a diploma- but taught enough to function as a responsible, affectionate member of the community."<sup>19</sup>

Serving a meal, planting a field, building a building, and being the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit take careful attention. Building up and maintaining the Christian community deserves our best. It's a pastor's most important work. So don't let *preacher religion* corrupt your faith in Christ and your love for his church. On this the thirty-fifth anniversary of my ordination as a deacon, and the twenty-eighth anniversary of my ordination as an elder, and on the occasion of being sent to Main Street, it's good to think on these worthy and difficult things together. So may the Lord give us wisdom and love, that together we may walk in the light till that fearsome and wonderful day when the books are opened and the fires lit. We know Charles Wesley took time for such. How else could he have written such sobering words? "Help me to watch and pray, and on thyself rely, assured if I my trust betray, I shall forever die."<sup>20</sup> It was meant to sober us all up, particularly the preachers.

**Phil Thrailkill, Main Street United Methodist Church, July 8, 2012**

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<sup>18</sup> An unforgettable quote from John Wimber.

<sup>19</sup> Curtis and Paul Jones, *500 Illustrations* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1997), 47.

<sup>20</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 314.

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### **III. STUDY QUESTIONS**

#### **v.5**

1. Why does Paul focus on the function of Christian leaders rather than their personality, the *what* rather than the *who*?
2. How are leaders a means to get the message to others? Who gives their assignments?

#### **vv.6-8**

3. How are vv.6-7 a paradox? What does it mean that we must work, but that life comes only from God, and that the two are not to be confused?
4. How is v.8 a motivator for cooperation and quality work?

#### **v.9**

5. Look at all Paul packs into this verse. Servants belong to God and work with one another in a church that is both God's field (organic reality) and God's building (something built). What do you think of these mixed metaphors?

#### **vv.10-15**

6. Why does Paul distinguish between the quality of the foundation and the mixed quality of what is built above ground?
7. What are some of the signs of shoddy work in the church? How is the crumbling of what used to be known as *the mainline churches* a sign of God's judgment?
8. What does it mean that God will test and tell the truth about all our work as pastors?
9. Why does Paul distinguish between work destroyed and persons saved in vv.14-15?

#### **vv.16-17**

10. What does it mean that the church is the holy dwelling place of God?
11. Why does Paul issue the warning of a curse on those who damage God's people?

### **IV. WHAT NOW? POSSIBLE ACTION STEPS**

1. Take your hymnal and meditate on Charles Wesley's hymn "Jesus, United by Thy Grace" (No. 561). Is this your feeling and commitment to this church?
  2. Ask your pastor, How can I pray for you in the next week? Then, check back and ask
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for a report.

3. Get a copy of *The Book of Discipline 2008* and read the sections on the meaning of the church; then ask, How is Main Street doing according to our church's teaching?
4. If God was to treat you the way you treat his church, would it go well for you?
5. Pray that God will begin to gather the pastors of Greenwood into a fellowship who would pastor and watch over the city's spiritual welfare together.
6. What can I do to show love for God's imperfect people today? Do it!

## **V. A PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH**

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Let us pray:

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,  
you have established the church of your Son Jesus Christ  
on the foundation of the apostles and their true teaching.  
From among the faithful you call men and women  
to serve in preaching and worship,  
in the care of your people, in mission,  
and in the ministries of leadership and church discipline.  
Grant courage and spiritual stamina to all pastors, O Lord.  
Help them live by the same grace  
and standards of holy living they proclaim to others.  
Strengthen this church by the power of the Holy Spirit,  
that some may hear the call to ordained ministry,  
that all the baptized may find places of faithful service,  
and that the name of Jesus may be made famous in this place.  
Save us from treating your church with anything but love and honor.  
Remove from us the character flaws and sins of gossip and complaint.  
We hunger for your holy and awesome presence and wait before you.  
Amen.**

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