

Text: 1 Corinthians 3:5-15

Title: Church Planting and Church Building

Truth: God causes church growth, but Christians must participate carefully.

Date/Location: Sunday March 15, 2020 at FBC (Coronavirus Sunday #1)

Introduction

This section of Scripture deals with a false view of how to do church ministry. The Corinthians had some strange ideas that led them to strife and envy and factions. The apostle will correct that and jolt them to the reality that they will be judged by God for their ministry behavior.

I. Why are the Corinthian Divisions So Foolish? Verses 5-8

There are five reasons given in verses 5 and 6:

A. Paul teaches the Corinthians that he himself and Apollos **are merely servants**. We might go so far as to say that the rhetorical question “Who then is Paul?” actually asserts that “Paul is nothing.” That would be taking it a bit too far, because Paul *was* a minister, a channel. He was a preacher, an instrument in the hands of the redeemer, a tool in the hand of God. He did *something*.¹ He was active and not just passive. So it is with Apollos and Peter. Through them the Christians believed the good news of Jesus Christ. This fact is far more significant than the name of the person who brought the gospel. That they were servants is all the more true of these men because Jesus considered Himself to have come to serve instead of to be served—and He is the king of creation! See Matthew 20:20-28. The fact that the believers in Corinth did not immediately recognize this is a symptom of their carnality.

Every believer is a servant of Christ. If you deny that, then you are in effect denying the reality of your profession.

B. The ministers **were merely doing an assignment** from the Lord. The idea is that they should not be the star of the show if they are merely doing their job. The boss gets the recognition. Like the servant who says “we have only done what was our duty to do.” There is no special praise for just doing your job (Luke 17:10). To each one the Lord gives an assignment. Paul’s and Peter’s were different, and so are yours and mine. But what is certain is that we do have such a task given by God. It may be more particular given the circumstances God has ordained for us,

¹ If it is truly the case that you are doing *nothing* for the Lord, then you need to crank it up a few notches.

or it may be left for us to follow the general instructions of God’s word. But it is something.

So here is the answer to the question—why are Corinthian divisions so foolish? Precisely because the leaders they divide over are *servants*!

- C. The ministers **are like gardeners**, v. 6, who planted and watered, but God is the master of the house. He is the owner of the garden. The gardeners plant and water, and prune and weed at the direction of the master.
- D. The ministers do not cause the growth; **God** does. In your garden this spring you will dig, plant, water, pull weeds, etc. But do you *cause* the growth? You do something necessary to make an environment where growth is possible and optimized. But God has designed the seed to grow, sends the rain, gives the sunshine, etc.

Application: In your family, you cannot cause your children to believe. But you can have children, and you can make an environment optimized for them to believe. It is God who gives the growth.

We should take note that *planting* (and later, *building*) are not direct references to evangelism and discipleship in the life of an individual. Rather, these concepts refer to church planting. Don’t think of the growth as limited to one plant or individual plants. Picture the entire garden, like a church, growing to maturity throughout the summer months until harvest.

- E. Verse 8 tells us that the one who plants and the one who waters **are one**. Today, we would say, “they are **on the same team**.” Yes, each will be rewarded according to their own labor. Some team players are MVPs, and some are experts on defense, and offense and special teams and so forth. In the end, it is a team effort that wins. But the “oneness” of the team makes it foolish to split up the team and be a fanatic for one or the other player, all of whom are doing the same work for the same Lord.

Note that gospel ministers will not be judged well only if they get spectacular results. That is because God gives the growth, not the minister. Judgment will be based on faithful effort, obedience, good stewardship, etc. The concern of the minister must be in planting, watering, and using whatever gifts they have been granted by God as good stewards of the manifold grace of God (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Verse 9 serves as a transition between metaphors and to a new subject. The proper way to regard the church planters has been the focus up to this point. But now the apostle turns the microscope onto the leaders and members of the Corinthian church. They have a part to play as well.

II. The Corinthians are Distracted from their Real Ministry, v. 10-15

- A. Carnality and factions demonstrated in their boasting about men (and themselves, no doubt) have overtaken the church. The Corinthians profess to be wise, but their wisdom is worldly. It is not true wisdom from God. It is foolish. They have been so caught up in their divisions and their foolish estimations of God's ministers that they have lost sight of their own role and how they will be judged by God for it.
- B. Paul planted the church on a sure foundation. He did so as a wise master builder, laying down the truth of the gospel in such a way that Christ was the center of attention—not Paul or Apollos.
- C. The foundation is specified in verse 11: Jesus Christ. This means Christ and Him crucified; the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ; the righteousness of Christ; everything about Him; the word of Christ, which is the entire New Testament revelation given to us in our Bibles. The foundation is the starting point for all building, and that is Jesus Christ. He, His gospel, His cross, His death, His resurrection are at the base of every true local church and of the entire church considered as a whole.

This offers us an opportunity to clarify something that has been confused by many people over the centuries. In Ephesians 2:20 the Scripture says that the church has been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone. The foundation truly is Christ *and all the revelation about Him that God granted to the apostles and prophets*. Peter and Paul are not themselves part of the foundation. Rather, *the truth of Christ revealed through Peter and Paul* is that foundation.

- D. Because of the perfection of the foundation, each person—and that includes every minister in Corinth and every member in Corinth, and it includes every church member listening to this message—each person must pay careful attention to how they serve their church family. You can adorn the name of Christ, or you can sully it, by your conduct in life and church. This applies to YOU, not just pastors and missionaries!
- 1. Exodus 25:40 records God's exhortation to Moses that he was required to make everything for the tabernacle "according to the pattern" which was shown to him on Mount Sinai. No deviation was acceptable. Hebrews 8:5 highlights this because the earthly tabernacle served as a shadow of the heavenly reality of the dwelling place of God. It could not be made any way that the Jews pleased.

2. Like in those days, the apostle Paul, Apollos, the apostle Peter, and others, were required to lay the exact foundation designed by God. They were to follow to the ‘T’ what God told them to do when building a church. They were not designers or architects. They were builders with a pre-existing plan. The foundation is Jesus Christ. He is the same building technology that we use today to build churches. *That* has not changed. The human builders and gardeners are new, but the requirement is the same.
- E. Some people build quality on the foundation: gold, silver, precious stones. These represent faithful service to the church in accord with God’s word. This service enhances the worship, instruction, fellowship, and evangelism of the church. This service glorifies God. But other things done in the church, although maybe not evil *per se*, are useless and have little edifying value. They are weak, like hay and stubble. They won’t last the fiery evaluation of God because they are not in accord with His word. “Fire” refers to God’s deep and all-knowing evaluation of the ministry done in the church—both its motive and its action. No frauds will hoodwink God.
- F. At the judgment seat of Christ, every Christian will be evaluated as to whether their work in and for and toward the church was worthwhile. Note that the judgment has to do with how we build in the church—not with how we build the kingdom or do social work or politics or whatever else. We are part of the **church** and that is where God expects us to function.
- G. The evaluation will lead to reward or loss. Needless to say, you don’t want to be among those who suffer all loss. Don’t comfort yourself with the phrase “but he himself will be saved.” That is not commendable.

Conclusion

Jesus is the primary builder of the church (Matt. 16:18). He is the master planter and gardener. The apostles in the first century joined His gardening and building team and were thus fellow-workers with Him. But the garden/field and the building belonged to God. The agricultural and building metaphors might capture our attention, but the emphasis is on **God**. It is **God’s** church, **God’s** people, **God’s** idea, **God’s** ministry, **God’s** glory, **God’s** honor, **God’s** field, and **God’s** building.

Hopefully you are a good gospel channel/pipe, and you are not all clogged up with dirt, preventing you from being useful to God in the church.