

PROPER MINISTRY

by Steve Zeisler

Think of an occasion when you were moved to protest against the tragic loss of something that was valuable and beautiful. Have you ever hiked to a mountain lake and come upon a beautiful scene that almost took your breath away, only to later discover piles of aluminum cans littering the campsites? You found your spirit crying out in protest. People should not despoil natural beauty by throwing their garbage around. I read recently that the Parthenon in Athens is slowly crumbling away because of the smog in the city. Modern man's thoughtlessness is destroying a thing of beauty that has stood for hundreds of years. That is a tragedy that makes people protest and ask why should this be allowed to happen.

If you have ever felt this way, then you will be able to relate to the apostle Paul's emotional state as he wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth. In his sacrificial death, our Lord made possible the wonder of his church. He intended it to be beautiful and attractive to outsiders. He wanted it to be a wise and godly representation of its Lord, and to be filled with his glory. The church at Corinth, however, was anything but beautiful, glorious and wise. Paul wrote that there was hardly anything about the Corinthian Christians that distinguished them from the world around. They had taken the work of art that was the church and, to put it in modern terms, allowed the smog and the beer cans to sully it. The church of Jesus Christ at Corinth, which ought to have taken people's breath away by its beauty and attractiveness, had become instead an irritant and an eyesore. There is an element of tragedy in Paul's writing. His purpose is to help the Corinthians see who they really ought to be; to encourage them to throw off what was hindering them in their walk of faith.

The message of chapter 3 of Paul's letter is built around three metaphors: a child, a garden, and a building. All three of these are in various stages of growth, and all three figure the church. Each begins in a small and somewhat insignificant way, but the expectation is that in time each will grow in beauty and significance. In using these metaphors for the church, the body of Christ, Paul is suggesting that Christians need to be serious about their contribution to the growth of the body. If the church does not grow according to God's plan, then it will be malformed and stunted in its outreach. Paul therefore wants the Corinthian church to get both its head and its heart straight so that growth can proceed unhindered. The "child" should be carefully nourished so that it will grow up healthy; the "field," which should be watered, cultivated and cared for, should be both beautiful and bountiful; the "building" should become a temple in which God can reside; it must be built with gold, silver and precious stones, not wood, hay and straw. Each of these metaphors, a child, a field and a building, therefore, stands for something which has the potential for growth and beauty; but each also has the possibility of failure. Paul's desire is that the church should realize its potential and be all that God wants it to be.

Chapter 3:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field, God's building.

What will the church at Corinth become? Will it become mature and useful to God, or will it become deformed and useless? In order to speak to that issue, Paul turns to the issue of leadership among Christians. In chapters 1 and 2 the apostle addressed the issue of the wisdom of God versus the wisdom of the world. He pointed out that the wisdom of the world is shallow and passing, but the wisdom that is God's will give life. Here in chapter 3, Paul turns from the teaching to the teachers, to those who instruct and care for believers. What should we expect from Christian leaders? What sort of response to them is appropriate? How should leaders behave? The inference here is that all Christians, at one time or another, will be in positions of leadership. Whether in the home, in the workplace or in the neighborhood, all Christians will be thrust into leadership sometime. This is the subject which Paul raises in this chapter.

We can sense the apostle's frustration in these opening words of chapter 3. The Corinthians should long since have progressed beyond infancy. But that was what they were demonstrating to the world by their fleshliness, jealousy and strife. They were dividing up into factions, proudly attributing their salvation to Paul, Apollos, Peter and others. This fan-club mentality was causing all kinds of problems in the church. That is why Paul calls them "babes in Christ." Their behavior was infantile. Their concept of Christian leadership was painful to the apostle.

In the world, of course, competition is considered a virtue. In every field of endeavor--business, politics, sports--competition is the key to success.

Competition, strife and jealousy are normal behavior in the world, says Paul, but such behavior among Christians is shameful and demeaning. The Christian church should be a thing of beauty. It should be magnificent, attractive and unspoiled, like a wilderness lake. But competition and fleshliness had the effect of despoiling the essence of the Corinthian church. These negative traits were having the same effect on the church as empty beer cans and garbage have on a wilderness.

Let us think for a moment how we as Christians experience competitiveness. Have you as a Christian ever encountered a setting where jealousy was a factor? When I was a pastor ministering on a university campus, I frequently saw different Christian groups competing for the allegiance of students. As I recall those days I can see that I was also guilty of that. I was just as concerned as they about the size of the meetings, how the message was received, etc.

Some churches are concerned that their congregations grow larger than the one down the street. Others seek to attract big-name speakers to minister among them. We even see competitiveness as to a certain style of ministry within groups in a church such as ours. Some say that evangelism should be the emphasis. They gather in a group committed to world evangelization. They have certain tapes which they listen to to spur them on; they read certain books that encourage them. Christ wants to save the world, they say, and they are serious about that commission. Other groups maintain that teaching and Bible study is the key. For them, biblical languages, Scripture memorization and study are what count. Style of ministry is the dividing line for such groups. Charismatics prefer a style of ministry which holds that ecstasy and emotionalism are central. Others prefer to retain a sense of control in the Spirit. So the groups form and divide up, looking down their noses at each other. To such, Paul says, "You are merely human. You might as well not be Christians. As long as that kind of competition exists, there is no evidence of God's touch among you."

Beginning with verse 5, the apostle gives a series of insights about Christian leaders. He does so to correct immature thinking. Paul holds up Apollos, a gifted teacher of Scripture, as an example. Here was a man who had great ability. He was a teacher who stirred up a sense of excitement among his listeners. Paul himself had massive intellect and extraordinary credentials. Perhaps his physical appearance was not noteworthy, but the power of his calling in Christ and his ability as an apostle more than made up for any lack in his person.

The apostle knows that at least two factions in Corinth had gathered around Apollos and himself, so he sets about setting the record straight for the Corinthians. And he does so by reminding them that, far from being in competition with each other, both he and Apollos complemented one another in their ministry. Paul planted, Apollos watered, "but God was causing the growth." One was called to spread the seed, while another was given the task of nourishing the new growth. It is God's intention that the different gifts complement and support each other. If you see a Christian leader wanting to retain control of his ministry to himself alone, you

can be certain that he is immature. Godly people, like Apollos and Paul, magnified the ministry of others.

Verse 7 gives further correction to the foolishness of the Corinthians which was degrading the church. In another great insight into Christian leadership, Paul declares, "So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth." No one but God himself was deserving of praise and thanks. The channels of his efforts among the Corinthians--Paul, Apollos, Cephas, etc.--were of little account compared to God who gave the growth. Leaders should have an acute sense that God really does not need them, but that they are privileged to be used by him.

In verse 8 Paul makes two more interesting points about Christian leadership. All leaders are equal, says Paul. It doesn't matter which gifts each possesses; as leaders, they are all on the same level (they "are one"). There is no room for hierarchies among leadership. In a church staff, seniors, juniors, junior assistants and learners who sense that a gulf exists between them do not bring honor to Christ. Paul is saying that all who are called into Christian leadership ought to recognize their equality and treat one another as equals.

All are servants of God. God does not speak to the senior pastor and have him pass along to others on staff what he wants done. Each relates to God on an individual basis. God does not have need for an intermediary to relate to someone the word of God for him. And furthermore, each will be rewarded by God for his or her faithfulness.

Finally, verse 9 makes the point, "For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field, God's building." In a sense, this is the opposite side of the coin of verse 7. There Paul says, "None of us is anything." Compared to God, no one makes any independent contribution. On the other hand, in his condescension and love, God had chosen to make them his fellow-workers.

There is a sense in which it is a very honorable thing to serve the Lord, to speak for him and represent him. Paul is not saying that humble, Christ-centered leadership is to be looked down upon. It is rather that arrogance and independence have no part in godly ministry. Humble reception of what God gives allows us to be his fellow-workers. And going through life having a sense of being God's co-worker is a very satisfying thing. Rather than allowing themselves to join competitive groups who gather around a particular teacher of the gospel, or a style of ministry, Paul exhorts that the Corinthians have a deep sense of community. They served the same Lord, and he expected them to be different in their responses than the world around. All should contribute to mutual growth in Christ, each one using his or her gift to benefit the body, without any sense of competition.

What, then, does leadership involve? What are the nuts and bolts of doing the job of leadership? Every one of us will at some stage be involved in the job of Christian leadership. Each one of us will be called upon to form part of someone's Christian character, or to be a channel of some other service. Thus Paul turns to the third of his metaphors, which is a building, God's building. What the apostle actually has in mind is a temple, not just any building, but a temple in which God himself will reside, a place in which the presence of God will be discovered.

Of course, God does not live in buildings but in people. Just as a building is built step by step--first the foundation, then the walls, then the roof, etc.--so also a Christian is built spiritually over a period of time, a spiritual foundation is laid. Others come along to encourage, challenge and teach, putting in place the blocks that into making character. That is how a place is built to contain the Lord.

Verse 10:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is

burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

Let us picture the apostle in this instance in the role of a building contractor. Serving under him as contractor are various tradesmen--electricians, plumbers, bricklayers, etc.--all of whom are essential to the completion of the project. The same is true in the building of a Christian's character. No one person will do everything, but many people will be involved in building into a Christian's life through the years.

Here Paul is saying that Christians have a choice to make in this matter as to what kind of material they will use when they build into someone's life. Will they build with wood, hay and straw, or with gold, silver and valuable stones, such as blocks of marble? Will they use spiritual materials, appealing to the wisdom that comes from God, or will they utilize fleshly things that will not stand up under difficulty and pressure? This is Paul's question. Will our building into someone's life be a blessing or not?

We might put the question this way. If you had a choice, would you write a Christian jingle or a great Christian hymn? Would you compose a few trite lines, or would you instead choose to write a hymn that reflected the attributes of God? Which would you rather do, pray for someone in trouble or give him a pep-talk? A pep-talk is when someone pats you on the head and says something like, "God will work it out, I'm sure." But praying for people involves sitting down and holding their hands, listening intently to what they have to say. The first approach is building with wood, hay and straw; the second is to build with gold, silver and valuable stones.

We're talking about truth versus platitudes; slogans versus an honest declaration of what God says in his word; the difference between encouraging someone to discover and use his gifts versus using degrees or psychological tests as the basis for ministry; the difference between throwing money at problems and building relationships to solve problems. Christians have a choice, says Paul, if they are going to build in lives, if they are going to place a block in the building which people are becoming. It's a choice between spiritual reality and uselessness.

In verses 16 and 17 Paul comments on the building of which he has been speaking. As he views the church in Corinth and the mess the Corinthians are making of it, he says, "Don't you realize that you are God's temple? If anyone corrupts God's temple, God will corrupt him." The Corinthians should be careful to take seriously Christian growth and church life, to not treat these things as if they did not matter and therefore allow problems to develop. If the church is destroyed, says Paul, then the ones who did the destroying will themselves be destroyed by God.

The apostle closes with this admonition:

Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless." So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

"Stop deceiving yourselves," says Paul to the Corinthians, "give up trusting in the wisdom of the world, and begin to boast in God's wisdom."

Let's not let the Parthenon crumble because we're too stupid to deal with the smog in Athens. Let's not leave the beer cans around the lake to despoil it. The church of Jesus Christ is too valuable, bought with too great a price, to allow competition and fleshliness to ruin it.

To the Corinthians belonged all the things which Paul lists here. Therefore they should cease the strife, jealousy and faction-making which were characteristic of them. Instead, they should build into each other's lives with things of value.

Let each one of us also think of the temple that we are becoming and consider our influence among our brothers and sisters. As we do so, let us give the Lord opportunity to put our thinking right again.

So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you; and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

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