

*SERIES: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE IN THE CHURCH*

## **A CRISIS OF CHURCH-BUILDING**

**by Doug Goins**

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The focus of this passage is the metaphor of a building, a holy temple being built by God himself, to describe the church. In 2 Corinthians 6:16 the apostle Paul will say to these Christians, "For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said,

**'I will dwell in them and walk among them;  
And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'**"

In verse 9, which we looked at in the last message (Discovery Paper 4513), Paul told them they were God's building. Now in verse 16 of this passage, 3:10-17, Paul asks, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God....?"

You may remember from your childhood the finger play,

"Here is the church, and here is the steeple,  
Open the doors, and see all the people."

Perhaps we still unconsciously think that the building we meet in on Sunday mornings is the church. But of course the church of Jesus Christ is the people themselves. When Jesus said, "...I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18), he was talking about us, his people. But a building is still a helpful symbol for the church. The apostle Peter calls us "living stones" (1 Peter 2:15). We're being built into this mighty temple of God (see Ephesians 2:19-22).

By way of context for this paragraph, we've been working through the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians. Paul is dealing primarily with the issue of divisions in the Corinthian church. Some of the problems are that they have confused God's eternal, divine wisdom with their own human wisdom; they have viewed the gospel as another philosophical system, or at least truth they could add philosophy on top of; and they have exalted certain Christian teachers into leaders of rival parties. Paul says that in all of that they betray their immaturity in Christ. In the previous paragraph of chapter 3 Paul calls them babies in Christ, and he challenges them to grow up in their understanding of who they are and what the church is. He says, "You are servants, you are God's fellow-workers." Along with Paul and Apollos and other people in the church, they are assisting God in helping one another grow up.

In the passage at hand he calls them to help build the church in Corinth into a temple by investing their lives in one another, modeling and sharing with each other the wisdom of God.

### **JESUS CHRIST PLUS NOTHING**

Verses 10-11:

**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.**

Paul's concern here is about the resources and the quality of the workmanship that are contributed to the building of the church.

As we will see when we come to the subsequent verses, there are eight indefinite pronouns that dominate this paragraph. They emphasize the fact that all of us in the body of Christ are included here. Verse 10: "Another is building," "Let each man be careful." Verse 11: "No man can lay a foundation." Verse 12: "If any man builds." Verse 13: "Each man's work" (twice). Verses 14-15: "If any man's work" (twice). We are all servants, we are all called fellow-workers with God, and we are all called to build into one another's lives.

Let's talk about the foundation that the church is built on. Paul begins by emphasizing not his own activity but the grace and wisdom of God. Paul defines his activity as laying the foundation for a strong church at Corinth. We saw that idea in verse 6, where he says the task God called him to was to plant the seed of the gospel in the hearts of the Corinthians. But Paul makes very clear in the opening phrase of verse 10 that whatever success he had in Corinth as a specialist in laying foundations, doing evangelism, establishing the church, he couldn't have done it without God's grace, without the power and help of the Holy Spirit. He says he was a wise master builder, but it wasn't Paul's wisdom or knowledge, but the wisdom of God that he drew on. He told his friends in the church in Rome, "For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me...."(15:18). God was at work through Paul as the foundation for that church was laid.

The second half of verse 10 reminds us that a foundation is supposed to support something. In the case of the church, it's a spiritual building. Paul is concerned that those who continue the work that he started work as faithfully and effectively as he did. They've got to draw on God's gracious resources and reflect God's spiritual wisdom. Paul is referring particularly to evangelists and pastors and teachers in the church, but the principle applies to every single believer. All of us to some extent represent the gospel by what we do. Our life and our witness with each other must be grounded in the Lord Jesus and in his word.

Paul is very pointed in verse 11 that Jesus Christ is the only foundation that the church can stand on. The preaching that Paul began with in Corinth was very foundational. He refers to it back in 2:1-2: "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." The foundation of the church is not New Testament ethics or the moral teachings of Jesus. And as important as love and good works are, neither of those is the foundation that the church is built on. It's not built on the decision-making or teachings of leaders throughout the two thousand years of church history. It's built on Jesus Christ and him alone.

In a sense, the foundation is all of the Scriptures, because Jesus said that the Scriptures are about him, from him, and for him. The Old Testament anticipates the incarnation of Jesus. The gospels present his life and ministry and message. The book of Acts is a history of the churches he sovereignly planted. All the New Testament letters are commentary explaining the life and work of Jesus. And the Revelation anticipates the hope of his triumphant reign to come. Jesus once told the Jewish religious leaders, "You search the Scriptures...and it is these that bear witness of Me...." (John 5:39). Paul says in Ephesians 2:20 that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, and Jesus is the cornerstone. So here he says, "Don't try to lay another foundation."

There's a certain pastor I've watched for twenty years. He was the pastor of a big, very successful church. Then about ten years ago he chose to put Christian experience on a par with the Lord Jesus, crucified and resurrected. He began to preach the new message, and he split the church right down the middle. He started another church, and within a couple of years that church also split. He is pastoring another small church now. There is an instability when we try to build the church on anything except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

## GOD'S WISDOM VS. HUMAN WISDOM

The next section, verses 12-15, focuses on the superstructure. This section is an elaboration of the concern the apostle Paul expresses in the last phrase in verse 10, that each person be careful about the quality of workmanship and the choice of materials he uses to construct the building. Jesus is the only foundation that the church can be built on, but the quality of construction of the superstructure can vary widely. This section suggests that our spiritual influence on one another, the kind of materials that we're building into each other's

lives, can be either valuable or worthless. Look at verses 12-13:

**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.**

Every Christian is a builder, and every Christian builds into the life of the church with some sort of materials. The questions we need to ask ourselves are, How am I working for the good of the whole, for the building up of those around me? And what am I building with? Verse 12 says that we have a choice of two opposite kinds of building materials. The first three things that are listed, gold, silver, and precious stones, have some things in common: They are permanent, beautiful, valuable, and difficult to obtain. They are of high quality. Verse 14 says that they remain through the test. That means that they are noncombustible. The other three things listed, wood, hay and stubble, are just the opposite. They are temporary, ordinary, cheap, and easy to obtain. They are of low quality. And verse 15 says that they will burn up. They are a fire hazard, highly combustible.

A number of times in the first three chapters, Paul has already identified the material of permanent value that we are to build into one another's lives in the church. He uses the phrase "the wisdom of God." Look at 2:6-7: "Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory...." It's eternal, and it's for our good. It's for the completion of the process that God is at work on in our lives. The wisdom of God is the whole realm of spiritual insight into our identity; into him who created us; into human history; into problem-solving based on God's revelation of what is true and false, what is reality and fantasy, what is life-giving and death-dealing. In the Old Testament the wisdom of God is compared to gold and silver and other treasure a number of times. Over and over again the writer of Proverbs challenges his son to seek the wisdom of God because it will last. And it's only God's insights for life revealed in his word that will have any permanent, life-changing impact on those around us in the church.

What do the contrasting building materials represent, the things that won't last? What might we build into each others lives in the church that will be destroyed? Again, in the first three chapters of this letter, Paul has contrasted the wisdom of God with human wisdom. Look at 2:12-13: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words." Paul speaks of human wisdom, the spirit of the world, and words or speculations. The wisdom of the world is a common-sense view of life. It's the constantly changing opinions and traditions and philosophies and social theories that our race manufactures.

In any given encounter with other believers, we are building spiritual permanence or spiritual instability, depending on the source of the contribution. Paul has contrasted these as being of the spirit or of the flesh in these first three chapters. James contrasts them as being from above or from below. Sometimes people won't be able to tell which materials we are building with, especially if they're babies in Christ. But God knows because he is reading our hearts. And verse 13 says ultimately everybody is going to know what we are building into each other's lives. The workmanship and the materials will all be tested.

The analogy Paul uses is the evaluation of fire. Fire won't destroy the valuable building materials of God's wisdom, but it will consume the transitory foolishness of man. The day Paul is referring to in verse 13, which is going to declare the true value of what we've built, is the time when Jesus Christ will come again. At that time all we believers are going to stand before him for evaluation, but not with regard to our salvation, because as verse 15 makes clear, we will be saved, even if there's loss and shame. Listen to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:10: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." Being before the Lord Jesus and a testing by fire will be juxtaposed.

When the glorified Jesus appeared to the apostle John on the island of Patmos, John described him in the Revelation as having eyes that were like a flame of fire, having a burning intensity, evaluating. Our loving Lord Jesus, who is passionately committed to the life and health of the church, will examine our building

activity and materials and sort out the bad and the good, what is of the Spirit and what is of the flesh, what is built on God's revealed eternal word and what is built on the current human philosophies swirling around us.

Now what do you think that testing will be like? Nobody knows, but here is my own subjective, personal vision. Jesus will sit down with me and review videotapes of my life, the two of us together. I'll see how I responded to different situations. I've actually made a list of things I know I've been through that will be up for evaluation. I saw myself responding to a friend's confusion and anger over his wife's infidelity. I saw myself trying to teach a class of four-year-olds. I saw myself trying to discipline our teenagers. I remember engaging a young widow after the tragic death of her new husband. I remember leading an evangelistic Bible study with some antagonistic, uncooperative co-workers when I was in the business world. And I see the Lord Jesus, not standing with his arms crossed, tapping his toe impatiently, or shaking his finger in accusation, but sitting with his arm around my shoulders. He's wincing with me in embarrassment when we see my failures in ministry. He's offering a word of excited affirmation and encouragement when we see a gold nugget of eternal impact in somebody's life. It can go either way at this evaluation: This was good, that was bad; this was fleshly, that was spiritual.

## AN ETERNAL INVESTMENT IN OTHERS

These two contrasting eternal outcomes of the inspection are elaborated in verses 14-15. Both will be true for every single one of us. For me, the good news from this passage is that this evaluation doesn't come at the end of the meeting, the end of the quarter, or the end of the season, but at the end of the age, when everything is consummated:

**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.**

Verse 14 talks about the joyful reward of knowing that we have spiritually contributed to the building up of the church in a lasting way. We were introduced to the word "reward" in verse 8 of the previous passage. We saw that this reward is relational in nature; it's appropriate to a servant of Jesus Christ, a fellow-worker with God. We talked about the loving affirmation we'll hear from the Lord Jesus, "Well done, good and faithful slave..." (Matthew 25:21, 23). It will not be on the basis of external results or any worldly definition of success, but rather on the work we've done out of a heart of love for the Lord Jesus. I found another reference this week in the writings of the apostle Paul that strengthened my conviction about the relational nature of this reward. In 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, he writes this to his friends: "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy." The reward is the joy that we're going to have because we've invested our lives in people for the sake of the kingdom, the satisfaction of seeing lives changed for eternity.

Now there is a contrast in verse 15. There can be the embarrassing loss of knowing that our fleshly activity in the church was expended to no eternal purpose. All of us will find ourselves here at the judgment seat of Christ. If we're honest, we know that there have been times when we worked in the church on the basis of the flesh instead of the Spirit. I can recall the shameful, wasteful effort of offering superficial religious platitudes in counseling because I didn't want to go into the depths of someone's emotional pain and spiritual confusion. A Christian pep talk is wood, hay and stubble. The hard work of prayerful, sensitive, Biblical direction is gold and silver and precious stones.

But one of the points of this section is that we don't have to build with combustible material. That's the logic of Paul's gracious warning to the Corinthians. It's also the loving appeal of the apostle John in his first letter: "And now little children, abide in Him [the Lord Jesus], so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at his coming" (2:28). We can make the kind of choices in terms of building materials that we don't have to fear being ashamed of when we sit down with Jesus to review the videotapes.

## THE DANGER OF DAMAGING THE TEMPLE OF GOD

This passage closes in verses 16-17 with a reminder of how protective God is toward his church:

**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.**

I like the way Eugene Petersen paraphrases these two verses in *The Message*: "You realize, don't you, that you are the temple of God, and God Himself is present in you. No one will get by with vandalizing God's temple, you can be sure of that. God's temple is sacred and you, remember, are the temple."

The "you" here is plural. All of us gathered together are the temple, and the Spirit of God is resident in us collectively. There are places where Paul talks about our individual bodies as temples, but here he is talking about all of us together in the church. Metaphorically, this church is no ordinary building. It's a spiritual temple that God himself is building.

This picture would be very vivid and wonderful for those Corinthians. They had heard about the temple in Jerusalem, but most of them weren't Jews. They were surrounded by pagan Gentile temples that were ornate and gorgeous. Their little fellowship, in contrast, was probably pretty unimpressive. But Paul says to them, "You are a beautiful temple that is special. The Spirit of God lives in you every time you're together." Whether it's a Sunday morning worship service, a home fellowship, a Sunday school class, or even just a couple of us who bump into each other in the Safeway parking lot and share together about the spiritual realities of the kingdom, we are a temple. Remember what Jesus said: "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matthew 18:20). And from God's perspective it's glorious and beautiful.

He uses the word "holy," which means sacred. We're to be different from all the other temples or religious institutions. God takes this very seriously. We come to a thundering climax in verse 17, which says that if God finds anybody undermining the spiritual nature of the church, he will deal with that person—lovingly but forcefully. God is very protective of what is his. The word translated "destroy" is translated "corrupt" or "defile" in every other place that it's used in the New Testament. We know that nothing can destroy the church of God. The gates of hell won't prevail against it, because God is committed to it. But we can damage or injure it, or in Petersen's words, vandalize it. And if we do, we're going to suffer the divine consequences. Again, this doesn't mean eternal condemnation, because verse 15 assures us that each worker will be saved, even if he suffers the loss of knowing his work was not spiritually constructive.

How do we damage or corrupt the church? Looking back at the context to this point, the Corinthians had introduced the wisdom of the world into their decision-making and their teaching. It was hard to tell what was Biblical and what was the secular philosophy of Corinth in that church. They had allowed fleshly competition to defile their fellowship. And they ended up treating each other no differently than any nonbelievers in pagan institutions would. We're going to see in the chapters ahead that there were ugly legal battles between members of the church. There were power struggles in leadership, with teachers and prophets battling for preeminence, position, and influence in the church. The church had permitted lax moral standards to go unjudged within the community; they were living with serious immorality and nobody was saying a word. Their corporate worship life was out of control. Personal experience had become the most important thing in worship, and self-indulgence was the rule.

But the good news, the logic of the appeal that Paul is making, is that they don't have to continue living out these destructive attitudes and behaviors. Paul's motive in writing this is to remind the Corinthian Christians of who they are. They don't have to live in contradiction to their true identity as God's holy ones.

I believe that one of our desperate needs in the church is to recapture this vision of what God intends us to be. Most of us tend to take our life together too lightly. Seldom do we sense that our church can be an experience of community that is so powerfully indwelt by the Spirit that it is a genuine alternative to the pagan world that surrounds us.

In closing, let me ask you three important questions, going back through this passage. The first one has to do with the issue of foundation. Jesus Christ is the foundation. Are you committed to Jesus Christ alone and to

his apostolic word as the only foundation for our church? Or do we need Christ crucified plus other foundational issues on which to build our church?

Let me ask you about this issue of the process of building the superstructure. What kind of workmanship and materials are you building into your brothers and sisters in this church? Have you become invested in building materials that won't stand the test? I remembered last week as I was studying this, the wasted effort that I put into several human systems based on worldly wisdom, especially in my earlier years in ministry. These were philosophical, managerial, and psychological systems that became far more important to me than the gospel itself. They were relational wood, hay and stubble. The ironic thing is that I've seen all that modern wisdom swept away by newer combustible materials.

The last question concerns this issue of the nature of the church, our identity. Do you take the church and your identity as a saint, a holy, set-apart one in this holy temple of God, as seriously as he does? The good news is that we don't have to go on living with the Corinthian casualness Paul has exposed here. We must examine our hearts and see what is Corinthian and what is Christian, what is from below and what is from above.

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Catalog No. 4514  
1 Corinthians 3:10-17  
Seventh Message  
Doug Goins  
July 13, 1997

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