Bible Commentaries

Coffman's Commentaries on the Bible ~ 1 Corinthians 3 ~

Verse 1

1 **COR**. 3

This chapter falls logically into two divisions having reference to fellow-laborers in God's field (1 Corinthians 3:1-9a), and to fellow-workers in God's building (1 Corinthians 3:9b-17), with a short summary and recapitulation of the apostle's argument in the epistle to this point (1 Corinthians 3:18-23).

THE FIELD

The unspiritual, worldly conduct of the Corinthians, glorying in various parties, was the occasion for Paul's introduction of the metaphor of farm workers, such a comparison no doubt coming to the recipients of this letter as somewhat of a shock.

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:1)

Brethren ... Tempering the stern things he was about to say, Paul began with this word of loving affection.

Spiritual ... carnal ... "There is little profit in seeking out the technical denotation of the Greek words from which these terms are translated, because Paul himself explained exactly what he meant. The **SPIRITUAL** were those who, after conversion, had continued to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, no longer continuing as "babes in Christ." The **CARNAL** were those who were continuing to live like the unconverted, full of envy, jealousy and strife.

The background of Paul's words here was probably the allegation of false apostles (2 Corinthians 11:12-15), or teachers, who had made the simplicity of Paul's teaching (when the Corinthians were converted) an excuse to "criticize him as a shallow teacher,"[1] insinuating that Paul was deficient, as compared with themselves. This verse is thus a refutation of the false teachers. Paul flatly told the Corinthians that their immature spiritual condition rendered them incapable of receiving any more advanced instruction than he had provided.

It appears that some of the Corinthians had been impressed by the pretentious claims of false teachers; but Paul in this chapter affirmed that "Their philosophical pretense was a sign of their spiritual infancy, produced faction, tended to destroy the church (1 Corinthians 3:17), and resulted in no permanent value (1 Corinthians 3:12-15)."[2] Speaking of such a false teacher, Macknight said, "He had represented Paul as either ignorant or unfaithful, and boasted concerning himself that he had given them complete instruction."[3]

Babes in Christ ... It is evident from the next verse that Paul did not blame them for being immature at the time of their conversion; nevertheless this expression, as used by Paul, "was deprecatory."[4] See Hebrews 5:11ff and 6:11.

[1] J. W. McGarvey, Commentary on First Corinthians (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1916), p. 62.

[2] Henry H. Halley, Bible Handbook (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1927), p. 545.

[3] James Macknight, Apostolical Epistles and Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), p. 44.

[4] T. Teignmouth Shore, Ellicott's Commentary on the Holy Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. 295.

Verse 2

I fed you with milk, not with meat; for ye were not able to bear it: nay, not even now are ye able.

Milk ... meat ... Hebrews 5:11-14,**1** Peter 2:2 employ this metaphor and explain it. The milk is the first principles (Hebrews 6:1,2); meat is more advanced learning. "It is the symbol of preaching in which it is possible to unfold the full richness and magnificence of the gospel."[5]

Not even now are ye able ... is written as censure. "This describes a condition wholly inexcusable; by now they should have grown up."[6] It is expected of young Christians that they should be weak "as babes," this having been true of the Twelve themselves, of whom Jesus said, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12).

[5] F. W. Grosheide, The New International Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), p. 71.

[6] Paul W. Marsh, A New Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1969), p. 380.

Verse 3

For ye are yet carnal for whereas there is among you, jealousy and strife, are ye not carnal, and do ye not walk after the manner of men?

Carnal ... Paul by this word did not deny that the Corinthians were Christians; they were still "brethren"; but their lives were marred by serious failures. Russell declared that Paul used this word,

Not in the modern meaning of "sensual," but as meaning earthly secular, worldly, having the worldly spirit of partisan strife, like (some) politicians rather than Christian disciples.[7]

Jealousy and strife ... These call to mind Paul's list of the works of the flesh (**Galatians 5:19-21**); and "Where these exist, the flesh rules. Had they been spiritual, they would have looked to Christ and would not have been partisans of men."[8]

After the manner of men ... means "like ordinary, unconverted men."

[7] John William Russell, Compact Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964), p. 407.

[8] David Lipscomb, Commentary on First Corinthians (Nashville: The Gospel Advocate Company, 1935), p. 47.

For when one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not men? What then is Apollos? and what is Paul? Ministers through whom ye believed; and each as the Lord gave to him.

I am of Paul ... It is incorrect to suppose that either Paul or Apollos encouraged or approved any such divisions, nor is there the slightest hint that any rivalry existed between them. "Paul always spoke of Apollos with the highest esteem and affection."[9]

What then is Apollos ... Paul ... Certainly, such persons even as Paul and Apollos are nothing worthy of receiving any adoration and glory from men who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Significantly, it appears here that Paul and Apollos were instruments only, and not, in any sense, the source of divine grace. The second word is not that the Corinthians believed "in" Paul and Apollos, but "through" them.

Ministers ... Although Paul was the grandest apostle of the New Covenant, he nevertheless refers to himself here with a title which, as variously translated in the New Testament, means "servant," "minister," or "deacon." Paul would countenance no party, not even one that proposed to honor him as a man.

And each as the Lord gave to him ... Any benefit that had come to the Christians at Corinth originated not with the instruments through whom it was conveyed, but with the Lord of glory.

Following up on the humility that should pertain to all mortal servants of God, Paul climaxed his argument with an analogy in which he and Apollos were represented merely as laborers working on a farm belonging to another.

Verse 6

I planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: but each shall receive his own reward, according to his own labor.

The location depicted here is fully identified later as "God's field" (1 Corinthians 3:9). The thought is that Paul planted the crop; Apollos cultivated and watered it. There is no reference to baptism in "watered."

Are one ... They were one in mutual love and respect for each other, one in purpose, one in status as God's servants, and one in their reliance upon the Lord who would reward both.

According to his own labor ... reveals that the gospel preacher's reward will be measured according to his work, and not according to his success. The injunction of God is not that men shall go and "convert" all nations, but that they shall "preach the gospel to the whole creation."

Verse 9

For we are God's fellow workers: ye are God's husbandry, God's building.

God's fellow-workers ... is ambiguous, and may refer either to men who cooperate with God, or to men who cooperate with each other in God's service."**[10]** Despite the fact of there being a sense in which Christians are God's partners at the present time, and that this partnership shall be expanded at the judgment (Matthew 25:23), it is hard to believe that Paul was stressing such a thought here. Marsh said that the Greek text favors the idea of partnership with God, and that the context indicates the other meaning,**[11]** Since the oneness of

Paul and Apollos had just been mentioned, it is natural to assume that the meaning here is "fellow-servants" under God. It would not have suited Paul's purpose to announce himself as "God's partner." However, the higher meaning of this expression, "occurring only here in the New Testament,"[12] may not be denied. The Greek text has: "God's fellow-workers; God's husbandry; God's building."

Ye are God's husbandry ... In the analogy, the Corinthian congregation was the vineyard, or field, where Apollos and Paul had been fellow-workers. Shore thought that this word "husbandry," which is translated from a Greek word **GEORGION**, "might have been the cause of the Christian name `George' becoming so popular in the church."[13]

Paul dramatically shifted to another metaphor in the same line, that of God's building, house, or temple.

God's building ... Practically all of the next eight verses have reference to the church as the temple of God. For extended remarks on the church as the true temple, see under Acts 7:47-50 in this series of commentaries (Commentary on Acts, pp. 142-144). See also under 1 Corinthians 3:16.

[10] F. W. Grosheide, op. cit., p. 82.

[11] Paul W. Marsh, op. cit., p. 381.

[12] Ibid.

[13] T. Teignmouth Shore, op. cit., p. 296.

Verse 10

According to the grace of God which was given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder I laid a foundation; and another buildeth thereon. But let each man take heed how he buildeth thereon.

A foundation ... The foundation which Paul laid at Corinth is Jesus Christ (**1 Corinthians 3:11**), and this was done through the faithful proclamation of the whole gospel of our Lord.

Another buildeth thereon ... Although Farrar believed that "the allusion here may be to Apollos,"^[14] it may be that Paul, in this new metaphor, considered that both Apollos and himself had laid the foundation in the preaching of Christ, a work which had also been shared by all of the apostles and inspired teachers. The entire apostolic community could do little more than lay the foundation (of Christ); and Christians themselves were expected to continue the building of God's true temple, the church. As Grosheide said:

They leave the work of building to the congregation itself. The Corinthians were actually engaged in building, but in a way the apostle felt obliged to condemn. Paul was not content with what the Corinthians had done themselves[15]

The words **ANOTHER** and **EACH MAN** are too indefinite to apply to Apollos, having rather an application to all who labor in God's building.

[14] F. W. Farrar, The Pulpit Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 94.

[15] F. W. Grosheide, op. cit., p. 74.

Verse 11

For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 16:15, Jesus declared that his church would be built upon the rock, and here is revealed what the rock is; it is Christ. "Paul said that Christ is the only foundation that can be laid."[16] No man may begin anywhere else. "This is still worthy of emphasis in a day when so many build their `Christianity' without Christ, on a foundation of good works, humanism or science."[17] Of course, this is not the only metaphor of Christ's preeminence in his kingdom. He is also called the door of the sheepfold (John 10:7), the chief corner stone (Ephesians 2:20), the head of the body (Ephesians 1:22,23), etc.

[16] David Lipscomb, op. cit., p. 51.

[17] Leon Morris, Tyndale Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), p. 67.

Verse 12

But if any man buildeth on the foundation gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble.

Two widely held misconceptions are grounded on this verse, which is understood (1) as "applicable primarily, if not exclusively to teachers,"^[18] and (2) as applying to **DOCTRINES** of two classes, (a) gold, etc., and (b) wood, etc. It is evident, of course, that the six kinds of building materials are of two classes: (1) the valuable and permanent and (2) the cheap and destructible; but the conviction of this writer is that the two kinds of people built into God's temple, the church, constitute the reality indicated here.

If these words had been directed primarily to Christian teachers, it seems inconceivable that Paul would have used the words "each man" and "any man" no less than six times in **1** Corinthians **3:10-15**. Ministers as a class of persons different from the rank and file of Christians were not a feature of the churches of that era, every Christian being a builder in God's temple; and such is indicated by these words.

Regarding the view that the six classes of materials are various doctrines used in building God's temple, a view advocated by an unbelievably large number of scholars, was nevertheless refuted by Macknight thus:

As the apostle is speaking of the Christian church, consisting of the believers of all nations, of which church Christ is the foundation, it is evident that the materials built on this foundation (gold, silver, etc.) cannot represent the doctrines, but the disciples of Christ ... In no passage of scripture is the temple or church of God said to consist of doctrines, but of the disciples of Christ, who are called living stones built up of a spiritual house or temple (1 Peter 2:5,6)[19]

In addition to the views of Macknight cited here, there is also the consideration that all of the true doctrine of Christianity is comprehensively included in Christ himself, that the totality of his doctrine is the foundation, and that there remain no more doctrines of gold, silver, hay or stubble that are to be built into God's church by men. The two classes of materials must refer, therefore, to the two kinds of people built into God's temple (the church) by the advocates of Christianity, whether by ministers and teachers, or by the so-called laity. As for seeing only two classes in these six kinds of materials, McGarvey observed that:

The first three kinds were found in their fireproof temples, materials worthy of sacred structures; and the latter three were used in their frail, combustible huts, but which were in no way dedicated to divinity.[20]

McGarvey made the application of this verse as follows:

The church should be built of true Christians, the proper material; and not of worldly-minded hypocrites, or of those who estimate the oracles of God as on a par with the philosophies of men. The day of judgment will reveal the true character of all who are in the church.[21]

[18] John Wesley, One Volume New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids:. Baker Book House, 1972), in loco.

[19] James Macknight, Apostolical Epistles and Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), p. 52.

[20] J. W. McGarvey, op. cit., p. 64.

[21] Ibid.

Verse 13

Each man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself shall prove each man's work of what sort it is.

The day ... according to McGarvey, and many others, is a reference to the judgment day when Jesus shall be revealed from heaven "in flaming fire" (**2 Thessalonians 1:7**); but some have understood it as a day of terrible persecutions such as the "fiery trial" (**1 Peter 4:12**) prophetically mentioned by both Paul and Peter. Despite the fact of there being an element of testing in times of great persecution, agreement is felt with Morris who declared: "**THE DAY** is clearly the day when Christ returns, the day of judgment."^[22]

Only the judgment day will reveal what is and what is not a part of the true temple of God; and, according to Christ himself it will be a time of many surprises (Matthew 7:15-23; 25:34-46).

Verse 14

If any man's work shall abide which he built thereon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

The fact that people do not fully understand this passage is implicit in the truth that some have built up the theory of purgatory, based partly on what is stated here. The whole concept of purgatory is foreign to the word of God, but the advocates of it are still deriving immense revenues through the preaching of it. Again from Macknight:

The Romish clergy, seeing that this doctrine properly managed, might be made an inexhaustible source of wealth to their order, have represented this fire of purgatory as lighted up from the very beginning of the world, and have kept it burning ever since, and have assumed to themselves the power of detaining souls in that fire, and of releasing them from it; whereby they have drawn great sums of money from the ignorant and superstitious.[23]

This writer is grieved to know that even now there are some, who were once baptized into Christ and served as elders of God's church, whose children are paying to get them prayed out of purgatory!

What this verse actually means is that the persons led to Christ through the efforts of any Christian may defect from the faith, proving themselves wood, hay or stubble, and that the loss of such souls will not affect the salvation of a Christian teacher, whose reward would in some manner unknown to us have been far greater if they had not defected, and whose salvation "so as through fire" is understood by such language to be only by the narrowest margin, "by the skin of his teeth" (Job 19:20).

Yet so as through fire ... has the meaning of "something resembling" an escape from fire, as in "snatching them out of the fire" (Jude 1:1:23); and it is certain that this phrase has absolutely nothing in it of actual fire. It is a figure of speech, prompted possibly by Paul's reference to the judgment and the fire of that day, but not to be identified as the same thing.

The doctrine of purgatory is not merely unscriptural and anti-scriptural, there being not one word in the entire scriptures to support such a monstrous thesis; but it is effectively refuted in a single question: "If any church believes in such a thing, and in their own power, through prayer, to deliver people from it; why do they not pray all people out of it immediately for sweet charity's sake?"

Verse 16

Know ye not that ye are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?

The words of this text are sometimes applied to individuals; but, as Morris said, "The reference here is to the church."[24] There is no article before "temple" in the Greek; and it would be more accurately translated, "Ye are a temple of God."[25] "The building of which the apostle speaks is the Christian church, called in this verse The Temple of God."[26]

THE CHURCH THE TEMPLE OF GOD

Of all the beautiful metaphors of God's church such as the bride of Christ, the vineyard of the Lord, the household of God, the pillar and ground of the truth, the spiritual body of Christ, and the flock of Christ, none is more beautiful or intriguing than "The Temple of God."

The first suggestion ever made regarding a temple for the one true God was made by David, whose conscience was stricken with the thought of his own house of cedar compared with the humble tent-shrine which housed the ark of the covenant. Nathan the prophet, however, explained to David that God had never once expressed any desire to have such a house (temple), stating emphatically that after David's death, David's son would build God a house, that his kingdom would be established for ever in the person of that "seed" (which was Christ, of course). See **2 Samuel 7:1-13**. Concerning the Greater Son of David, who is Christ, it was prophesied that he would build a house (temple) for God's name and that his throne would be established for ever. From the remarkable teachings in this passage from Samuel it is absolutely clear that God never intended that a physical temple would be constructed in Jerusalem. The departure of Israel from God's word in **2 Samuel 7** is exactly parallel to their departure from God's word in **1 Samuel 8**.

How did David react to the prophet's forbidding him in God's name to build a temple, and promising that "the Son of David" would build God's temple (a prophecy of the church)? He said, in effect, "Well, that has to be Bathsheba's boy! Solomon will build the temple!" To be sure he did so, but there is no evidence whatever that the building of a material temple in Jerusalem was any different in the sight of God than the setting up of the earthly monarchy in the days of Samuel. God permitted both. He used both. He accommodated to the hardness of the people's heart; but that extravagant earthly temple of the Jews was only a second outcropping of the fleshly desire of Israel to be like the nations around them, which had their richly ornamented temples erected to pagan deities.

It is known that God would not permit David to build the temple because of his wickedness. He was a man of blood. But was Solomon any less wicked and bloody? His notorious debaucheries were the scandal of forty generations.

Moreover, the temple proved to be as big a stumbling block to the Jews as the secular kingdom was. Christ's first announcement to his generation included the fact that "One greater than the temple is here!" (Matthew 12:6). While Christ was on earth, the true temple was "his body" (John 2:21); and after Pentecost, the true temple has been nothing other than the spiritual body of Christ. This was the element of Stephen's speech that so infuriated the religious partisans in Jerusalem that they mobbed him. See under 1 Corinthians 3:9.

Therefore, Paul's designation of the body of Christ in this passage as the temple of God is of the utmost significance. Paul himself had, with difficulty, come to understand this. As soon as he was converted, he went straight to that old secular temple; and God told him to get out of the place, even out of the city (Acts 22:17-21); and Paul, even after that, returned to the temple where he was mobbed; and in the behavior of the temple partisans (including the high priest), Paul finally read the will of God as it had been declared by Jesus that the temple was nothing but a "den of thieves and robbers" (Mark 11:17), that it was not God's house at all, but the house of the Jews, and that it was left unto them "desolate" (Matthew 23:38).

The above reflections are not denied by the fact of God's using the temple after the Jews constructed it against his will; he did the same thing with the secular kingdom.

The true temple of God, therefore, has never been anything else except the church of Jesus Christ our Lord. In it alone, not in some man-made shrine, men are called to worship and serve the Lord of glory. Meeting houses are not, in any sense, "true" sanctuaries.

The fact of God's Spirit dwelling in the spiritual body of Christ which is the church does not deny the residence of the Spirit of promise in the hearts of individual Christians (Acts 2:38ff; Ephesians 1:13).

[24] Leon Morris, op. cit., p. 69.

[25] Ibid.

[26] James Macknight, op. cit., p. 46.

Verse 17

If any man destroyeth the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, and such are ye.

The conduct of the Corinthians was such that the Spirit of God would be grieved and denied of any place in their hearts, thus destroying God's true temple; and just as any defilement of the ancient tabernacle had been punishable by death, there would be fearful retribution against all who defile the church. In context, this was a terrible warning to the Corinthians, but it applies to all who ever became a part of God's church. As Grosheide declared: "It is clear that the judgment of God is meant; it may refer to suffering loss (1 Corinthians 3:15), but also to eternal life."[27]

Verse 18

Let no man deceive himself. If any man thinketh that he is wise among you in this world, let him become a fool, that he may become wise.

A SUMMARY OF PRECEDING ADMONITIONS

Here begins the summary of what Paul had written up to here. This through **1** Corinthians 3:23 gives the highlights of what Paul had written up to this point.

Dummelow's paraphrase of this is:

Do not deceive yourselves; but if there be any of you priding himself on his worldly wisdom, let him quickly unlearn it, that he may learn the true wisdom.[28]

Macknight gave another interesting paraphrase of the same verse:

Let no teacher deceive himself with false notions of prudence. If any teacher among you thinketh to be wise, in this age of spreading the gospel, by misrepresenting its doctrines for the purpose of making it acceptable to bad men, let him become a fool in his own eyes, by preaching the gospel sincerely, that he may be really wise.[29]

This verse is a short summary of much Paul had written in Corinthians thus far; and it has the effect of condemning intellectual pride, one of the most hurtful of human vanities. In this vivid phrase Paul urged the man who would be wise to become a fool. "This is a simple way of urging a man to be humble enough to learn." [30]

[28] J. R. Dummelow, Commentary on the Holy Bible (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), p. 898.

[29] James Macknight, op. cit., p. 55.

[30] William Barclay, The Letters to the Corinthians (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 39.

Verse 19

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He that taketh the wise in their craftiness.

As Shore observed:

With the exception of the reference in **James 5:11** to the "proverbial patience" of Job, this is the only allusion to Job, or to the book of Job in the New Testament.**[31]**

Paul's quotation is from **Job 5:13**, where Eliphaz the Temanite was speaking against Job, declaring that "God frustrates the devices of the crafty ... and taketh the wise in their own craftiness." Eliphaz was wrong in his application of these words to Job, but the words themselves are true. Adam Clarke gave an example of God's doing just that type of thing when:

The pagans raised up persecution against the Church of Christ in order to destroy it; but this became the very means of quickly spreading it over the earth, and of destroying the whole pagan system. Thus the wise were taken in their own craftiness.[32]

Of course, history affords countless examples of the same thing.

[31] T. Teignmouth Shore, op. cit., p. 297.

[32] Adam Clark, Commentary on the Holy Bible (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1831), Vol. VI, p. 206.

Verse 20

And again, The Lord knoweth the reasonings of the wise, that they are vain.

This quotation is from **Psalms 94:11**. The teaching is not merely that "Human thought is fruitless in the sense of not producing anything of spiritual value that redeems man from sin,"**[33]** but that it is likewise ineffectual in devising any worthwhile solutions of the secular, political, economic and social problems which plague the entire world.

Verse 21

Wherefore, let no one glory in men. For all things are yours.

The brief summary concludes with the first clause here, except for the beautiful doxology. As Grosheide said, "Paul is here recapitulating all he has said before. The Corinthians named themselves after men; and those who do that love the wisdom of the world."[34]

Therefore, this verse makes it crystal clear what Paul condemned in **1 Corinthians 1:12**. It was the sin of their calling themselves after the names of men; and, as the name Christ is not that of a man in the sense of the

words use here, there cannot be the slightest condemnation upon those who said they were "of Christ." This same truth is evident in the next verse also.

Verse 22

For all things are yours; whether Paul, Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours.

This precious doxology reminds one of the famous passage in **Romans 5:31-37**; but this has a positive implication not in evidence there. "Things present, things to come, etc.," are there viewed as opposing the Christian but failing to thwart him; here the Christian is viewed as the possessor of everything in Christ.

This means that Christians are not to choose certain things, such as certain teachers; for all things are theirs. A Christian is in fact a member of no sect or party, because he has entered "into the possession of a fellowship and love which are as wide as the universe."[35]

Paul, Apollos, or Cephas ... Conspicuous by its absence is the so-called "Christ party" in this list, proving that the words "And I am of Christ," spoken in **1 Corinthians 1:12**, are the words of the apostle Paul himself, and not the slogan of any kind of a sect at Corinth.

Verse 23

And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.

Of course, the Christian's possession of all things in Jesus Christ derives absolutely from the fact of who Jesus Christ is; he is God incarnate in human flesh, the eternal Word, one with the Father, who is and was and will be before all time and now and for ever.

That Christ is God's, as here stated, "in no way detracts from his deity."[36] His essential oneness and equality with God are not under discussion in this verse, "but his subordination for the sake of human redemption."[37]

[36] Paul W. Marsh, op. cit., p. 382.

[37] Ibid.

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