



Session 3 – 1Corinthians 3:1-23

THE CHURCH AND ITS LEADERS

1. Verses 1-4 An immature view of the church

The Christians in Corinth have not matured in their faith; they have received the Holy Spirit, but they are showing no evidence of that – Paul describes them as not *spiritual* but *worldly*. Their way of thinking and behaving is much as it was before they were converted, and that is why there are divisions in the church.

“Paul does not deny that committed Christians may behave in infantile ways. The church is a school for sinners, not a museum for saints. But the actual situation at Corinth makes triumphalist claims about being ‘people of the Spirit’ look out of place or rather foolish, at least until they have more deeply appropriated the stance and lifestyle of the way of Christ and the cross.” (Thiselton)

Paul is saying, **“Become what you are!”** They DO have the Spirit, but they are showing no evidence of Him being in charge of their lives.

- **"Grow up! People of the Spirit really must stop behaving the way you are! Stop behaving like babies!"**
- Spiritual people are to walk in the Spirit. *Remaining worldly, stuck at the milk stage*, is NOT one of the options.
- Maturity IS expected of those who have the Spirit and come to understand the message of the cross. **3:2** – **“SOLID FOOD should be the staple diet of the Christian”.**

2. Verses 5-17 The church is God's; the leaders are servants

Paul uses three metaphors.

➤ **The church as God's farm (v.5-9)**

Paul and Apollos are God's servants with particular roles within the life of the church (v.5-6). (And their close co-operation means that it is ridiculous to use their names for rival factions.) They are answerable to God for how they carry out these roles (v.8). But the farm is God's; he is the one responsible for its existence and its growth (v.6b,7).

v.5 Apollos and Paul are servants.	God assigned them the task.
v.6 Paul planted, Apollos watered.	God was giving the growth.
v.7 The planter and the waterer are nothing.	But God who gives the growth (is everything).
v.8 The planter and the waterer are equal.	(God) will give them their individual reward for their toil.

Verse 9: Note the emphasis on **GOD**: "GOD'S fellow-workers are we; GOD'S field, GOD'S building are you". Ministers and those they serve are no more than God's instruments. So the only legitimate slogan is "we all belong to God". Ministers in God's church are **SERVANTS**.

➤ **The church as God's building (vv.10-15)**

The church has a solid foundations – it is Jesus Christ himself (v.11). Paul, with his preaching about Jesus, was the one who laid this foundation (v.10a); the leaders of the church are the ones who are building upon it. They have a great responsibility (v.10b), and they are answerable to God for whether they have done this well (like building with good, appropriate materials) or badly (with poor materials). Good building is done with the gospel of Jesus and the cross, which is precious and imperishable; poor building is done with the latest fashion in worldly wisdom, which will not last long. This is

not a question of the leaders' salvation: like all Christians, they are saved by God's grace and not by their work (v.15).

So Paul is concerned to warn those who are currently building the church. The master-builder lays the foundation, which others are building upon, **but** 'Take care how you build!' Then he uses the building imagery to urge those who are doing the building to use only imperishable materials (vv.12-13) because there will come a Day when each person's work will be tested and rewards will given according to the quality of the work done (vv.14-15).

➤ **The church as God's temple (v.16-17)**

The temple in Jerusalem was God's dwelling place. Now the church is God's dwelling place – the place where he lives by his Spirit. Wherever the Christians are gathered together: that is where people should be able to encounter the presence and the power of God. Paul gives a very stern warning to anyone who, through sticking to worldly wisdom or by creating division, destroys the church and prevents this from happening (v.17).

The church is the community indwelt by God's Spirit, so that it functions as a genuine alternative to the pagan world in which it is found.

God and his temple are HOLY; you Corinthians are also God's temple, so you are also to be HOLY. You must become what in fact by God's grace you already are: "God's HOLY temple in Corinth.

3. Verses 18-23 The leaders are God's gift to the church

Paul reminds his readers once again of the two key areas in which their thinking about the church is wrong:

- they are embracing Greek ideas of wisdom, when such wisdom is foolishness from God's perspective;
- they are boasting about the particular leaders to whom they feel that they owe allegiance.

So Paul sums up the theme of worldly wisdom and the futility of any kind of boasting about mere humans. There should be no boasting,

because everything belongs to Christ. But it is also true that **(v.21-22)** Paul, Apollos and Peter – and everything else – belong to the Corinthians; ALL things are theirs because they belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

It is only in him that the believer possesses all things; but in him, the believer does indeed possess all things.

For homegroups

1. According to Paul, who are ‘worldly’ Christians (**v.1**)? How does their spiritual immaturity show itself (**v.3,4**)?
2. What sorts of things characterise the wisdom of the world today? (What, for example, does current advertising tell us is wise?)
3. What do you think is the ‘milk’ of the gospel? What is the ‘solid food’? How do we distinguish between an infantile quarrel in the church and a legitimate difference of judgement on a subject of serious spiritual concern?
4. What evidence do you see in the church today that we regard jealousy, quarrelling and factions less seriously than Paul did?
5. What two key truths about Christian leaders do **v.5-17** teach us?
6. What is the warning in **v.12-15**?
7. How does the positive perspective of **v.21-23** help us to stop envying the wisdom and power of the world?
8. Which of Paul’s pictures of the church do you find most helpful?
9. When we pray for church leaders, what, in the light of this passage, should we pray?