

# Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?  
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.  
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.  
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same  
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.  
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

## **Servants Through Whom You Believed**

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**1 Corinthians 3:5-23**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 3:5. You recall that the Corinthian church had foolishly adopted the wisdom of the world, particularly with respect to the issue of ministry and leadership in the church and it had created harmful divisions and factions. So here in chapter 3 we see Paul hoping to heal those factions by imparting wisdom about ministry and leadership. He is operating under the assumption; common to the Bible; that right thinking will result in right living. Good theology will lead to good community. So he begins to help them to think correctly about who they are as a church, who leaders are within the church, and who they are for God in Christ. That is the flow of the conversation in chapter 3 and we will pick it up in verse 5. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

<sup>5</sup> What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup> I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. <sup>8</sup> He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. <sup>9</sup> For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

<sup>10</sup> According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— <sup>13</sup> each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. <sup>14</sup> If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

<sup>18</sup>Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.<sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,”<sup>20</sup> and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”<sup>21</sup> So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,<sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,<sup>23</sup> and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. (1 Corinthians 3:5–23 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

As we mentioned Paul wants us to think wisely about the church, about leadership and about who we are for God in Christ. He wants us to see first of all that:

## 1. The church is God’s Garden Temple

That would have been fairly obvious to any Biblically literate person reading or hearing this letter in the first century but we need a little help to get there. To us it sounds like Paul is saying two things. We hear him talking about gardening in verse 6:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:6 ESV)

That’s pretty obvious but then in verse 10 he begins to talk about a building; Paul says that he is a master builder laying a foundation and then in verse 16 he says:

Do you not know that **you are God’s temple** and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16 ESV)

So we have gardens and we have temples and that to us sounds like two different things but to Bible people in the first century that was only one thing. In the Bible God’s temple was always thought of as a garden – it was thought of as in some “the garden”. Do you remember back in the very beginning of the Bible? When God wanted to interact with the crown of his creation, what did he do? He planted a garden and he walked within it. He walked with man and woman in the cool of the evening breezes. The garden was where God met with people. That garden, The Garden of Eden, was apparently on a mountain. We know that because we are told that there was a spring of waters in the garden that spread out in four different directions as four great rivers. Well, I’m not sure how good your science is, but what would cause a spring of water to spread out in four different directions? Elevation. The garden was on a mountain. This imagery carries on throughout the whole Bible. God’s house, God’s place on earth is mountain and garden. In the first few chapters of Isaiah you have both sets of imagery:

<sup>2</sup> It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, <sup>3</sup> and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”  
(Isaiah 2:2–3 ESV)

Isaiah looks forward to a day when the mountain house of the Lord will be greatly exalted and people from every tribe, tongue and nation will stream to it – SUPERNATURALLY; keep in mind that rivers do not normally flow up a mountain – and they shall COME to learn God’s ways and to walk in God’s paths. A day will come when we’re going to be back in Eden, the prophet says, walking with God on the mountain, in the cool of the evening breezes.

A few chapters later the prophet says:

<sup>1</sup> Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.  
<sup>2</sup> He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.  
(Isaiah 5:1–2 ESV)

The prophet sings a song about God who built a vineyard – a garden - and he put in on a FERTILE HILL. He put a watchtower in the midst of it and he expected it to yield a pleasant harvest but it yielded wild and unusable fruit. He goes on to say:

<sup>5</sup> And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. <sup>6</sup> I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.  
<sup>7</sup> For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!  
(Isaiah 5:5–7 ESV)

The nation of Israel was once God’s mountain garden. Zion was his vineyard temple on a hill but because their hearts were hard and because they produced no fruit, God has turned against them! I shall break down their wall, God says, I shall make it a waste and command that no rain fall upon it. Because I looked for justice but I saw bloodshed. I looked for righteousness and heard only the cry of the abused.

The story of the Old Testament is, in one sense, the story of a God who plants a garden. He

wants a place where he can walk with his people and make something beautiful that can become by his grace and mercy a source of life and hope and salvation for the world. A city on a hill. A light in the darkness. A garden on a mountain. The fragrance of life among those who are perishing. You are that, Paul says. You are that! You are the garden temple of the Lord! Think about that and by God's grace, **BECOME WHAT YOU ARE!**

That's what Paul is calling on us to do; to think about who we are so as, by God's grace and by supplies of the Spirit, to become what we are. Let that rattle around in your soul, Paul says, and then tell me what you see. I'm sure that imagery suggests certain things to you, as it does to me. There are implications carried along in that metaphor; chief among them it seems to me would be that:

- i. The church must **CULTIVATE** fruit that is pleasing to the Lord

That was what went wrong back in the Old Testament. The prophet says that God:

looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. (Isaiah 5:2 ESV)

The Hebrew word there literally means "stink fruit". God did everything necessary for the cultivation of righteousness but because of the sinful hearts of men and women, all that his garden produced was stink fruit. It had to be burnt down and something had to change. The great and central promise of the Old Testament is that the conditions for fruitfulness would be changed by the gift of regeneration and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. God would change the deal and he would write a new covenant that had better helps and greater grace than the old; that's in Jeremiah:

<sup>31</sup> "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah,<sup>32</sup> not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.<sup>33</sup> For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:31-33 ESV)

Now Paul says, "You are **NEW COVENANT PEOPLE!** You have better help from God! You have a new heart, you have the indwelling Holy Spirit interpreting spiritual things to spiritual

people – things are different for you – things are better for you. By God’s greater graces, you are able to be a fruitful garden of righteousness unto the Lord. Your church can be filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control, - you can grow those things, over time and by supplies of the Spirit so get to it church. Make it your business to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in yourself and in this church for God’s glory and your good. You can do it. As the Word of God washes over you and the Spirit of God works within you, you can become what you are. You can become the fruitful planting of the Lord.

Secondly, this imagery suggests to me that:

- ii. The church must CALL people out of darkness and into His marvelous light

The reason the garden of God is on a mountain is so that people can see life from death and so be drawn out of darkness and into his marvelous light. Jesus said that:

<sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world. **A city set on a hill cannot be hidden**.... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14–16 ESV)

The church has to look like it has the life of God in it! It has to be better and it has to be near for it to call people out of darkness and into his marvelous light. Better and near. That is a very hard tension to maintain. Often we get so near so as to lose our distinctiveness. We become salt that has lost its saltiness. Often we have protected our community by withdrawing into the caves and into the desert and leaving the world to its own resources. Neither option is available to people who understand themselves as the Garden Temple of God. Such people understand that they need to give evidence of life – their church needs to manifest eternity. They understand that **GOOD CHURCH IS ACTUALLY COMPELLING EVANGELISM!** Choosing rather to be wronged – not forcing the church to process your petty grievances isn’t just proof of your sanctification, it’s a contribution to the cause of evangelism. You can win souls by swallowing offense. Good church is savingly attractive to the soul who lives in darkness. Think about that, Paul says, and become what you are.

I’m sure that there is more that we are meant to think about it in relation to the fact that the church is the Garden Temple of the Lord but we need to move on to the next thing Paul says. He

says that:

## 2. The leaders are God's humble servants

The problem in Corinth is that they were identifying with leaders in the same way that the people in their culture tended to identify with leaders. People in Corinth might call themselves Epicureans after the philosopher Epicurus. Or they might call themselves Platonists after the philosopher Plato – it was very common for people to identify with a famous leader and they had simply brought that worldly thinking into the church. I am a Pauline Christian one would say, another would say I am a Petrine Christian, while still another would say I am an Apollosian Christian – that is ridiculous, Paul says. These are not great men! These are farmers and brick layers only. Who in their right mind would so identify with a common labourer? That's what these men are. We are gardeners, brick layers for Jesus, nothing more.

I planted, Apollos watered .... neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:7 ESV)

Think about these things – think about the fact that the leader you are so enamoured with is nothing more than a slave in the Garden Temple of God. He is nothing special. He is not to be credited with anything of ultimate value – it is God who gives the growth. Let that rattle around in your brain and begin to act accordingly.

The image of Christian leaders wearing overalls and giant floppy sun hats while serving in God's garden seems to suggest a few things. Chief among them would be that:

i. Leaders are ordinary means

Paul says that these various leaders were merely:

Servants **through whom** you believed (1 Corinthians 3:5 ESV)

One of the things that careful Bible readers have long understood is that while God is ultimately Sovereign, he generally effects his will on the earth through ordinary means. Our grandparents wrote that down in the old Baptist Confession of Faith. In the section on Divine Providence they

said:

God, in his ordinary providence makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at His pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

God generally tends his garden with tools. Your pastor is a tool. But don't get too attached to that tool because God can work without him, God can work around him and if he gets in God's way, God can work against him at His pleasure. That just about says it all and that puts human leaders neatly in perspective. God will generally use them, but make no mistake, he doesn't need them and if they get in his way, he will take them out. Secondly Paul is saying that:

ii. Leaders are accountable to God

Paul talks about that at some length, he says:

<sup>13</sup> each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. <sup>14</sup> If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:13–15 ESV)

This is a fascinating bit of imagery. The city of Corinth was completely destroyed by fire in 146 BC, then 100 years later it was rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 BC so everyone hearing Paul's letter would have understood this imagery perfectly. Ancient cities were made of a mixture of materials. Some of those materials, like cut stone and marble would survive a fire, while other things like thatch and wood and straw would not. Therefore, the city was full of buildings where you could see some of the old remains – perhaps the stone foundation or the tile floor that had survived the fire and on top of that the new construction that had been added on. Paul says that the day of the Lord will be like that! God will come in fire and anything in the church that has not been built upon the pattern of the Apostolic Gospel and in keeping with Christ as cornerstone will be burned up and destroyed! It will not pass into eternity. The fullness of the kingdom will not be seen until Christ returns but SOME of what we build in this life will survive his coming. Good leaders want their work to survive the coming of the Lord but for some leaders the day of Christ's coming will be a day of shame and destruction. Their work will be revealed as so much vain glory. Matthew Henry says it best, he says:

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<sup>1</sup> Baptist Confession of Faith 1689, Chapter 5, Paragraph 3.

Ministers of Christ should take great care that they do not build their own fancies or false reasonings on the foundation of divine revelation. What they preach should be the plain doctrine of their Master, or what is perfectly agreeable with it.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to say:

The great day will pluck off all disguises, and make things appear as they are: *He whose work shall be burnt will suffer loss*. If he have built upon the right foundation wood and hay and stubble, he will suffer loss. His weakness and corruption will be the lessening of his glory, though he may in the general have been an honest and an upright Christian.<sup>3</sup>

Many pastors are building combustible cathedrals made of wood and hay upon the foundation of the Gospel. They themselves may be saved but they will be as naked men in heaven. Because they have built up their own fancies and false reasonings rather than preaching the apostolic, Christ centered Gospel - they will be saved but all their work will perish. That is the thought that motivates true Christian leaders. Paul says that a real leader is almost entirely indifferent to the judgment of his people, in chapter 4 of this letter he says:

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you (1 Corinthians 4:3 ESV)

I don't really care what you think about my ministry, Paul says. I am subject to a far higher court. I will work my tail off – not to please you – but to please the Master to whom I will give an account”. My friends the truth is, I can fool you into thinking I am wonderful and helpful and kind, but I can't fool God. The great day will pluck off all disguises and I would not stand naked and ashamed before my God. It is in fear of that I labour among you.

Leaders are accountable to God. They should not be trying to entertain you, Paul says, they should be trying to honour the master.

Paul summarizes and rounds off his argument in verses 18-23. For the sake of time I'll take you right to his conclusion. He says:

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<sup>2</sup>Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), n.p.

<sup>3</sup>Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), n.p.



<sup>21</sup> So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,<sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,<sup>23</sup> and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. (1 Corinthians 3:21–23 ESV)

The last thing Paul wants us to think about so that we can become what we are is this breathtaking truth that:

**3. The leaders are for you, the world is for you, life and death, present and future are for you. And you are for God in Christ.**

You see, conflict often enters a church when people think too much of themselves, but it's also true that conflict can enter a church when we think too little of ourselves. That's a common tension in Paul's letters. On the one hand he can tell you:

you were dead in the trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1 ESV)

And in the same letter he can say

he chose us in him before the foundation of the world ... so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:4 and 11 ESV)

Those thoughts don't seem to belong in the same letter but they do. You need to know who you were – lost and without hope in this world – and you need to know who you are now in Christ – you are the object of God's election, sons and daughters of God most high, heirs with Christ to all the world. You need to know both of those things, and it seems like maybe you don't, Paul says.

In chapter 1 Paul quoted them as saying: "I belong to Cephas" or "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Paul". "No, you don't", he says. "You don't belong to them, they belong to you. Those leaders are just a few of the many, many gifts that God has given to you so that you can become his children and live to the praise of his glory. In a sense those leaders only exist because God loves you." Paul will later characterize his own ministry in those same terms. He will say in 2 Corinthians 11:2

For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since **I betrothed you to one husband**, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. (2 Corinthians 11:2 ESV)

My ministry, my whole purpose, Paul says, has been to unite you to God in Christ. I exist because God loved you.

Some of you may need to be reminded of that this morning. Your leaders are here, in this church, because God loves you. He has set his eye on you. He knew you by name from before the foundation of the world and he has done everything to secure your redemption. There are times in our lives when we need to be reminded that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. I need to be reminded of that on a very regular basis. But there are times too when we need to be reminded that all things are ours in Christ. God made the world for Christ and for us – God is a Spirit and does not have a body like men, therefore God didn't need the world. The world is for you. Its for you to stand on while God woos you through leaders and agents and teachers and tools to the cross and through the cross to Him. That's what all of this is for; the world, life, death, the present, the future – its for you, its yours in Christ. When God made it all he was thinking of Jesus and with Jesus he was thinking of you. You have been, from before creation the object of God's affection, attention, election and redeeming grace. You are a chosen people; you are the Bride of Christ. Now, think about that, Paul says, and become what you are. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.