

1 Corinthians 3:1-23
Isaiah 28
Psalm 94

“No Other Foundation”

Feb 23, 2014

Verse 16 is famous – God’s statement that he is laying a foundation stone in Zion.
It’s quoted in Romans 9 and 1 Peter 2 –
and Paul plainly alludes to it in 1 Corinthians 3.

But the surrounding chapter is less well known.
It starts by speaking of God’s coming judgment upon “the drunkards of Ephraim” –
who refuse to heed the word of the LORD.
In Isaiah’s day the Assyrians swept down out of the north
and destroyed Ephraim – the northern kingdom of Israel.
But then the Assyrians kept coming!
And so the “scoffers” who ruled in Jerusalem
sought help from Egypt (the “covenant with death” in verse 15).
They thought that Egypt would save them from Assyria.

But God has laid a precious cornerstone in Zion – a sure foundation.
“Whoever believes will not be in haste” –
or as the LXX translates it, “whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

The great danger for Jerusalem – as for the church in Corinth – as for the church today –
is not a great and powerful nation that seeks to destroy them.
The Assyrians didn’t really care about Jerusalem.
Neither did the Romans really care about the early church.

A weak, feeble people off in a corner doing their own little thing –
who cares?

The great danger for Jerusalem – as for the church in Corinth – as for the church today –
is unbelief.

The great danger is that we will forget who our God is, and what he has said he will do.
Because when we forget him, we do one of two things:
1) either we start making alliances with the rulers of this age (Jerusalem),
2) or we start arguing and fighting with one another (Corinth).
It makes sense.
If we *love* God,
then we will love that which he loves, and hate that which he hates.
So, if we hate the people he loves,
then we are not loving God.
And if we love that which he hates (namely, the rebellious spirit of this age)
then we are not loving God.

You may have heard people say, “God hates sin, but loves the sinner.”

I appreciate the sentiment – but it’s not quite accurate.

God does not *love* sinners.

He *loves* what he has made.

So it is true to say that God *loves* all people – because he made all people!

Think of the way Paul says it in Romans 5:8,

“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

God loved us *while* we were sinners – that’s important! –

but that’s not the same thing as saying that God *loves* sinners.

Indeed, Paul’s point in Romans 5 is that if we are in Christ, then we are *no longer* sinners.

That doesn’t mean that we never sin –

but it does mean that we have been transformed by God’s grace.

Once we were sinners.

But now, in Christ we are holy – we are saints!

And that’s why Psalm 94 asks God to *bring vengeance* against the wicked.

We need to remember that vengeance is a good thing.

Vengeance is not a “feeling” of anger.

Vengeance is what is deserved by those who do wicked and nasty things to others.

Psalm 94 gives examples both of widespread oppression and individual affliction:

“They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage.

They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless.” (v5-6)

The modern equivalents would be “they commit genocide and they abuse children.”

God is a God of vengeance.

Because he loves all that he has made –

therefore he *hates* with perfect hatred those who do nasty wicked things to others.

Sing Psalm 94

Read 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:23

This passage is more than a little scary.

Because in verses 10-15, Paul tells me that there will come a Day
when my preaching will be evaluated by fire.

I say my *preaching* because that is the focus of Paul’s comments –

but I realize that my *conduct* plays a part in how my preaching is heard!

But my ministerial labors will one day be revealed for what they are – by fire.

Judgment Day is coming.

But Paul uses this not to terrify the congregation!

He uses it to encourage them as to how they should think about ministers.

How should you think about me?

Introduction: “Soulish” and “Spiritual” in Paul’s Thought

Paul starts by saying that the whole way that the Corinthians have been thinking about ministers is completely wrong.

They’ve been approaching everything in a purely *human* way.

We need to start with Paul’s whole discussion of “natural” and “spiritual.”

Like I said last time, “natural” is not a good translation in 2:14.

Paul uses the word, “psychical” – or “soulish” – in verse 14, in order to contrast the man who is characterized by “soul,” with the man who is characterized by “Spirit” – and by “Spirit” Paul is talking about the *Spirit of God*.

As Paul will say in 1 Cor 15, the first Adam became a living soul.

The last Adam – Christ – became a life-giving Spirit.

The Greek language is a lot like the English language.

You can use many different words to talk about the same thing – or you use those same words to distinguish between things.

Think about how we use the words

“heart, soul, mind, spirit, soul, life.”

They don’t all mean exactly the same thing,

but in the right context, any of them can be used to refer to “who I am.”

Paul will sometimes refer to this as the “inner man” –

speaking of who you really are at the core of your being.

In different letters Paul will use different words to describe this,

but in almost every letter he will use this paradigm.

Once, before you were in Christ, you were “in Adam.”

That’s his point in speaking of the “soulish person” (the *natural* person of 2:14).

When you believe in Christ, then you receive the Holy Spirit,

and thus you become a “Spiritual” person.

Now, this is where many people have misunderstood chapter 3, verse 1.

You may have heard people talk about “carnal Christians” –

as though only *some* Christians get the Holy Spirit.

Some people argue that there are “ordinary Christians” who are only “soulish” –

but then there are “spiritual Christians” who get the special gift of the Spirit.

And they point to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians,

where Paul says that he has to write to the Corinthians as “fleshly” as “carnal”!

Such people do not understand sarcasm.

Paul is writing to a divided Corinthian church.

And it seems clear that some Corinthians were bragging about being “spiritual” – but by “spiritual” they meant that they were devoted to “spiritual” things, and so they were better than “ordinary” Christians.

In other words, those who talk about “carnal Christians” vs. “spiritual Christians” are guilty of the same fault that Paul is *objecting to* in Corinth!!!

1. “You Are Still of the Flesh”: What Is Mere Humanity? (v1-4)

[READ] But I, brothers,^{1a} could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?

This is dripping with sarcasm!

Paul could have added, “are you not following Satan?”

But that would not mean that he was describing “Satanic Christians”!

Paul’s central point in 1 Corinthians 1-4 is to lay out for the church in Corinth the truth that in Christ God has brought his people into participation in the divine life.

Remember what we saw back in 1:9 –

“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.”

We have been called into the communal participation in the sonship of Jesus.

And Paul lays this out in a Trinitarian way.

God the Father has called us into the fellowship of his Son –
and he has done this through his Holy Spirit –

and because we have the Holy Spirit, we have the mind of Christ,
and therefore we understand the things freely given us by God.

We know God truly

only as we have fellowship with his Son,
and receive his Holy Spirit.

In contrast with this, Paul lays out what he refers to as being “merely human” in verse 4.

Mere humanity is “souliness” – life apart from the Holy Spirit.

Nowadays you often hear people talking about “human flourishing”
and the need for more “authentic” human community.

Paul would say that apart from Christ – and apart from the Holy Spirit –
humanity cannot flourish.

Mere humanity is a humanity divided – where jealousy and strife prevail.

And so when the church is divided – where jealousy and strife prevails in the church –
then we are “merely human” –

in contrast to the communal participation in Christ’s Sonship to which you are called.

And this is why Paul calls them “people of the flesh” behaving only in a “human way.”
For Paul, “the flesh” refers to those drives, desires, and customs
that are part of the “spirit of the world” (2:12).
Your inner man has been made new (“We have the mind of Christ”) –
but you must still continue to put to death the deeds of the flesh.

Paul’s point is that we should not be content with “mere humanity.”
He wishes to show them a more excellent way!

And this is where the work of the ministry is so important for the life of the church,
because...

2. The Work of the Ministry (v5-15)

a. The Farmer: “I Planted, Apollos Watered, But God Gave Growth” (v5-9)
⁵ *What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.*

Paul returns to the topic of the divisions in Corinth.

Some follow Paul, others Apollos, others Cephas.
But Paul asks, what is Apollos? What is Paul?

We are mere men – just like you.

We are servants – ministers –

the word “diakonoi” refers to someone who acts on behalf of another.

A diakonos is an agent or emissary who has delegated authority.

This is why Paul refers to himself (and to all church officers) as “diakonoi” –
because all church authority is *ministerial* –
in other words, all church authority is delegated authority.

Christ is head of his church – and so therefore those who exercise authority in the church
are emissaries and agents of Christ.

It’s why I get nervous when I hear pastors talking about *their* vision for *their* church.

Whether they realize it or not, they are encouraging people to imitate the Corinthians!

The church should not be about the “pastor’s vision” –
and the church should not be about the “people’s vision” –
the church should be about *Jesus Christ* and him crucified.

It’s why I try to make a point of saying, “I don’t know”

when you ask me questions that are related to someone else’s sphere of authority!

The Lord Jesus has given to each of his servants a particular task.

(Paul is setting you up for his later discussion of gifts in chapter 12,
where he’ll say that this is not only true for Paul and Apollos,
but for the whole church!)

In verses 5-9 Paul focuses on the beginning of the work – planting/watering:

⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

Remember, Paul is saying to the Corinthians,
“Don’t make a big deal about Paul and Apollos!”
We’re just servants – ministers – doing our job.

Given the agricultural language here,
you might expect Paul to talk about the harvest,
but he doesn’t keep the image moving consistently through to the end –
he switches from agriculture to construction in verse 9

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

In one sense, this may seem like a strange transition –
“planting and watering” usually does not result in buildings!

But the whole of redemptive history moves from a garden to a city –
and more particularly, the *garden* in Eden pointed forward to the *temple* of Solomon,
both of which are fulfilled in the *church* of Jesus Christ.

You are God’s field, God’s building.

And Paul describes the work of the minister in terms of the craftsman:

b. The Builder: “Let Each Take Care How He Builds” (v10-15)

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the foundation.

Paul has said that Christ Jesus has become to us wisdom from God,
righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1:30)

Christ and him crucified is the single message that Paul brought to Corinth (2:2).

And now he writes to the church of God in Corinth,

to those sanctified in Christ, called to be saints together with all those
who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,
both their Lord and ours (1:2)

And he has told them that the message of the cross is foolishness to Greeks,
and a scandal to Jews – but to those who are being saved,

Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God (1:24) –
a message that can only be received through the Holy Spirit (2:12).

The foundation – the basic message – has been laid.
There is no other foundation.

This is why the church rejected the Gnostics, the Arians, the Mormons –
each of these groups tried to lay a new foundation,
by redefining who *Christ* is.

You can have all sorts of differences *within* the church
(Methodists, Presbyterians, Eastern Orthodox, Baptists)
but all of those differences have to do with how we build on the foundation.

Listen to how Paul says it in verses 12-15:

¹² *Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—*
¹³ *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. ¹⁴ *If the work that anyone has*
built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ *If anyone's work is burned up, he*
will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Remember that Paul is talking about himself and Apollos
(and, by implication, other *teachers* and preachers).
Paul had spoken of preaching and teaching as “planting” and “watering” –
but now he switches to the image of building.

Right now, I’m building.

I am not just instructing you,
I am constructing you.
Paul laid a foundation of Christ and him crucified.
Paul preached a message that was not merely in plausible words of wisdom,
but he preached a message in demonstration of the Spirit and of power –
namely, the power and wisdom of the cross of Christ.

My task is to build on the foundation that Paul laid.
And I am to build with gold, silver, and precious stones.
Because a Day is coming when there will be a trial by fire –
and when that Day comes, all the wood, hay, and stubble will be burned.

Ancient cities feared fire far more than we do.

Anthony Thiselton says that
“The dread of fire sweeping through a dry Mediterranean city
with its mixed building materials
would have resonated more deeply with the addressees
than with most modern Western readers.” (313)

Wood was used for cheap buildings –
hay and straw was used for the thatched roofs of cheap buildings.
Gold, silver, and precious stones were used for the temple.
Precious stones might also refer to marble –
the most expensive (and the most durable) stone used for Roman buildings.

And Paul compares preaching to construction
because we use *words* to construct our world.
We understand ourselves and our place in the world through language – through words.
And preachers can either use words of gold – or words of straw – as they build the church

Let me use an example that we'll be coming to in a couple weeks.
In chapter 5 Paul will talk about homosexuals.

Or, actually, no – he won't.
Until the last 150 years, no one identified themselves as a homosexual *or* as a heterosexual.
Those words didn't exist.
One did not “construct” one's identity around sexual “orientation.”
And it does not seem to me that we are wise to adopt such a *construction* of identity ourselves.
Paul's point in chapter 5 will be, “Such *were* some of you!”
You were *once* identified with all sorts of unbelieving, unfaithful *practices*.
But not anymore.

My task as a minister of Christ is to construct you together into a holy temple –
a holy dwelling place for God –
so that just as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
so now that same powerful Word might construe us in his image.

This is why I set myself the task of preaching through the whole Bible in 17 years.
The whole Word of God needs to inform our identity.
We need to be shaped by the scriptures in the way that we think and talk and live.

Part of the reason for why I preach the way I do
is because I am convinced that the apostles preached gold, silver, and precious stones!
I want you to think about Jesus the way that they did.

Because I want my work to stand at the final Day!
I *know* that I have preached some stubbly sermons.
I want to do better!
I don't my work going up in flames at the final Day.
Paul says that at the final judgment,
each one's work will be revealed by fire.

To a certain extent, verses 10-15 primarily apply to me (as your pastor),
and then to a lesser extent to the elders and deacons.
Paul is talking about himself and Apollos – and others who build.
Preachers and teachers will see their work tested at the final Day.
You can see in verse 15 that Paul is not talking about salvation.
All of the people in view are saved – they are Christian teachers.
But some Christian ministers will suffer loss.
They will watch much of their ministry go up in flames.
They built an empire for themselves –

they made a name for themselves –
but their work will go up in flames,
because their work was fluff.

It was cheap.

They tried to build God's holy temple with wood, hay, and stubble.

I wish Paul had used an example here!

What does he mean by “wood, hay, and stubble”?

Given the context of the Corinthians divisions,

it seems clear that all preaching that is self-centered and unworthy of the gospel

will not survive “that Day.”

All preaching that is “merely human” and focuses on an appeal to human wisdom

will not survive “that Day.”

This is why we need to be focused – not on “what will work for this generation” –

but rather, on what will endure – what will survive the final judgment?!

(Paul's going to go on in the next chapter to say, I don't care about your judgment

because I'm going to have to face Jesus one day!

And what am I going to say to him?!)

So in one sense, most of you don't have to worry about this particular trial by fire!

Except in one thing.

You are the temple of God that I'm building.

If I build poorly, then my poor workmanship *directly* affects you!

So it is incumbent upon you to encourage me –

and to *help me* build more wisely!

I need to know (the elders need to know!) where you are struggling –

and how we can bring the word of God to bear in your life.

We use our annual visits to help us in this –

so when you get the email asking when is a good time for a visit,

please reply!

But you don't need to wait for a visit.

Talk to me – talk to an elder or a deacon.

Join a small group bible study.

I realize that we're fighting an uphill battle.

There are so many voices competing for your attention.

You are faced by a never-ending barrage of words –

each message seeking to construct you in a different way.

It's why I urge you to spend time reading the scriptures together as a family,

and on your own.

It's why I urge you to spend time together with each other,

studying the scriptures – and discussing good Christian literature.

It's why I caution you to be careful how much time you spend in front of the TV,

or other forms of “mindless” entertainment –
because *nothing* is mindless.
The spirit of the world is *actively* seeking to build you into its image,
and if you engage with the world *passively*,
then those words will construct you –
and you will think of yourself in “merely human” terms.

But Paul challenges you in verses 16-17:

3. The Point of the Ministry: “You Are That Temple” (v16-17)

¹⁶ *Do you not know that you^[b] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

As the footnote points out in verses 16-17,
the *you* is plural.

You – together – are the temple of God.
God’s Spirit dwells in you plural.

The point of Paul’s ministry – the point of all Christian ministry –
is the building of God’s holy temple.
Building with wood, hay, and stubble, is a bad idea.

But there is something worse – and that would be to *destroy* God’s temple.
Think back to Nebuchadnezzar.
The Babylonians captured Jerusalem and destroyed God’s temple.

Just a few decades later, the Medes and Persians destroyed the Babylonians,
and today Babylon is a desert waste.
If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.

But now *you* are the temple of God, and God’s Spirit dwells in you (plural).
And from Paul’s day to today, there have been modern Nebuchadnezzars
who have sought to destroy the church.
Paul himself was one of the first!
And, in one sense, God *did* destroy him!
Saul of Tarsus is no more – and in his place,
Paul the apostle brought the gospel to the nations.
But if they don’t repent,
then God will destroy those who seek to destroy his church.

Conclusion: “Become a Fool” (v18-23)

¹⁸ *Let no one deceive himself.*

Self-deception is so easy.

This is why we need the Word of God to unveil the deceitfulness of our hearts.

If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

There is a danger of elitism – that because you know fancy words,
therefore you know better than others.
There is also a danger of populism – that because you don't know fancy words,
therefore you know better than others!
Elitism says “trust the experts.”
Populism says, “trust the people.”

But elitism and populism have one thing in common:
they are both “the wisdom of this world.”

¹⁹ *For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,”* ²⁰ *and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”*

Elitism boasts in the “smart people.”
Populism boasts in the “common people.”
But Paul says:

²¹ *So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,* ²² *whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,* ²³ *and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

We *need* the word of Christ to redefine us – to remake us – to build us into his holy temple.

It's not about elitism or populism –
it's about *Jesus!*

If Jesus Christ is Lord – if *he* is King –
then, as Paul will conclude the chapter, “all things are yours,
whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death
or the present or the future – all are yours,
and you are Christ's and Christ is God's.” (v22-23)

If you have been called to the communal participation of the Son of God (1:9),
in other words, if you have now received the Holy Spirit
as the down payment of the inheritance of Jesus Christ,
if you have the mind of Christ and have been brought into the divine council,
then don't boast in men.

In the Nicene Creed, we confess “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”

And so therefore, we should value the contributions of *every branch* of Christ's church.

We should read our Fathers, Irenaeus, John Chryostom, Peter Lombard,
and we should appreciate the insights of our cousins,
Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Billy Graham.

The temple of our Lord Jesus Christ is more beautiful because of their labors.
They are all ours – because we are Christ's – and Christ is God's!