

1 Corinthians 3:5-23
Session 4 – Study Notes
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1. **Paul's main argument in Chapter 3 no longer focuses on the cross.** Instead, he relentlessly emphasizes that the church belongs to God. God brought it into being, and God will judge it.
2. **The human instruments that God has used to raise up the church are merely servants of God's larger purpose.** Therefore, it is foolish for the Corinthians to choose sides and pit one leader against another.
3. **Those who build with arrogance and false wisdom compromise the integrity and holiness of God's plan to bring the gospel to the world.**
4. **This section is structured around three metaphors for the church:**
 - The church as God's field (vv. 5-9)
 - The church as God's building (vv. 10-15)
 - The church as God's temple (vv. 16-17)
5. **The final part of the chapter (vv.18-23) first recapitulates the earlier teaching about wisdom, folly, and boasting and then concludes with a powerful affirmation that not only the church and its leaders but everything else in creation finally belongs to God.**
6. **Throughout this chapter, two fundamental points must be kept firmly in view.**
 - First, Paul thinks of the church as a concrete community of people in a particular locality.
 - Second, Paul's metaphors all refer to the community viewed corporately (**3: 5-9**)
7. **Paul demonstrates the futility of rallying around different leaders by using himself and Apollos as illustrations.**
8. **This passage shows that (diakonos) was not yet a technical term for a particular office in the church (deacon); here, it is a simple metaphor.**
9. **The fact that Apollo's and his designated chores were slightly different is of no consequence.**
10. **Anticipating Paul's shift to the "building" metaphor, we might recall the opening words of Psalm 127: Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.**
11. **Paul's reason for pursuing this line of reasoning is made clear in verse 8a: the efforts of the different servants are collaborative.**
12. **Paul argues that the one who plants and the one who waters are one.**

(3: 10-15)

13. **With the final words of verse 9, Paul shifts to a new metaphor.** “*You are God’s building.*”
14. **Paul’s argument here is carefully constructed.** He compares himself to a wise master builder. In the Greek term *Sophos*, Paul is both the skilled artisan and the wise teacher who lays down the one foundation.
15. **For that reason, a warning must be sounded to his successors.** “*Let each one take care how he builds.*” Shoddy workmanship on top of the sound apostolic foundation is not to be tolerated.
16. **Next, Paul explicitly articulates what was implicit in his use of the image of laying a foundation.** *The one foundation is Jesus Christ.*
17. **The fixed basis for the church’s construction is the kerygma, or proclamation, of Christ crucified.** Paul warns that those contractors who employ inferior materials will have the quality of their work exposed by the fire of God’s judgment.
18. **The imagery of fire as a sign of God’s judgment is deeply embedded** in the Old Testament and in Jewish apocalyptic traditions.
19. **According to most scholars there is not “the remotest reference to the state of the soul between death and judgment.”** Nor is there any reflection here on the purifying effect of fire. Paul is *not talking* about purgatory for individual souls but about the final divine testing of the solidity of the church as constructed by various apostolic laborers.
20. **The six different building materials, perhaps arranged in descending order of value** (3:12), have no special significance beyond the fact that the last three are combustible and the first three are not.
21. **Paul makes two points in the metaphor of the building.**
 - **First**, we’re workers for God.
 - **Second**, we’re worked upon by God.
22. **We’re at the same time the carpenters and the building.** The two are held in balance and reciprocal motion so that we’re constantly in a state of both being the church and becoming the church.
23. **The motif of “reward” and “loss” in verses 14-15 creates difficulties for many interpreters** because it seems to contradict Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith rather than by works.
24. **If salvation is solely through God’s grace**, how can Paul also speak of rewards and punishments based on the quality of the work of individuals?

So, let's look at several observations about this problem.

25. First, Paul held his doctrine of justification alongside a continuing belief that God will judge the deeds of individuals (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom 2:6-10)

- Secondly, Paul is not talking about the fate of individual souls at the final judgment but God's scrutiny of the building work of different preachers and leaders.

26. According to Paul, the incompetent subcontractor will be saved, even if his work is burned up.

27. Finally, the words translated "receive a reward" and "suffer loss" in the NRSV would be better understood as references to wages paid to workers and fines imposed on builders who do inadequate work. The same language has been found in ancient Greek inscriptions regarding penalties to be imposed on contractors who do inferior work or fail to meet their obligations.

The text should be translated,

"The fire will test what sort of work each subcontractor has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive his pay, but if the work of anyone is burned up, he will be fined; the subcontractor will be saved, but only as through fire."

The Church as God's Temple (3:16-17)

28. Paul's third metaphor may be understood as a development of the previous one.

- The community is not just any building but, in fact, the Temple of God.
- The place where God's spirit dwells.

29. It is crucial for us to understand that the verb and the second person pronoun in verse 16 are plural.

"Do you not know that you (plural) are the Temple of God and that God's Spirit dwells in you (plural)?"

- **The image here is of the Spirit dwelling not in the individual Christian (6:19) but in the gathered community.**

30. In focusing on the church, this metaphor is consistent with the other metaphors in Chapter 3.

31. When the Corinthians heard this language, they might well have first thought of the many pagan temples in their own city, such as the temple of Apollo.

- But when Paul speaks of God’s Spirit dwelling in a temple, he surely doesn’t mean just any random gods and temples of the pagan world.
- He can be thinking of only one thing: The Spirit of God of Israel in the Temple at Jerusalem.

32. For Jews like Paul, the Jerusalem temple had been understood as the central locus of the divine presence in the world.

- Thus, when Paul now transfers this claim to the community of predominantly Gentile Christians in Corinth, He is making a world-shattering move. Decentering the sacred space of Judaism.

33. He believes that the Spirit of God is present in the community and that the community is now the place where praise and worship are rightly offered up to God.

34. The community is the place where God resides.

- Those who split the community are offending God and calling down God’s judgment on their own heads.

35. God’s temple, he emphasizes, is holy;

“If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person.”

36. Paul then ends the section by driving home the image again: “You (*plural*) are that temple.

REFLECTIONS

- 1. In two sentences, describe what the church is.**
 - How would Paul sum up the definition of church in two sentences?
- 2. Paul uses the metaphors of field, building, and temple for the church. What metaphor would you use and why?**
- 3. Paul directs much of his commentary to the church as a whole. This is not a natural way of thinking in Western culture. How does it change the nature of what Paul has to say when we direct it solely toward individuals rather than the whole community? What kind of misguided theology might arise from this interpretation?**
- 4. Paul has dire warnings for leaders who do not build their ministry on the foundation of Jesus Christ. How might this understanding impact the church’s ability to recruit leaders? How could the church better equip its leaders for the ministry of Christ?**

1. First Corinthians, Interpretation, Richard B. Hays
2. First Corinthians, New Covenant Commentary, B. J. Oropeza
3. First Letter to the Corinthians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Roy E. Ciampa and Brian Rosner
4. Feasting on the Word, David Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor Editors