

1 Corinthians

Bible Study

The Masterbuilder

1 Corinthians 3:4–15

Paul is writing to the Corinthians church from Ephesus after finding out that there are contentions and divisions within the church. Instead of embracing the doctrine that Paul had taught them, they were following personalities. As a result of putting aside the doctrine of Paul, they stagnated and were capable of only ingesting the most rudimentary spiritual concepts. Paul could only feed them with milk when they should have been able to have a good spiritual steak dinner. The internal divisions were a direct result of their spiritual immaturity.

Paul as their example

Paul uses himself as an example for how they should act. He carried on his ministry knowing that it is God who was behind any spiritual outcome. He worked with many other people to accomplish the things that God wanted them to accomplish. Each person was doing their own part in the edification of the body. Paul, and the other apostles and workers, were all working together with a unified focus on serving God.

In contrast, the members of the Corinthian assembly were focusing on their own individual desires instead of upon the needs of each other. They were spitting over individual likes and dislikes instead of uniting over a common doctrine. Paul was a living demonstration of how he could unite in ministry with others in order to accomplish the work of the Lord. Each minister of God did their work, but it was God who brought it all together to make it work for His glory and purpose.

It's not unusual for Paul to use himself as an example for us to follow. To the Corinthians he begged them to be followers of him, even as he was of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1, 4:16). He sprinkles this admonition throughout his writings based on his authority as an apostle of Christ (Philippians 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:9). This is why he told Timothy to hold on to the sound words of doctrine that was given to him, and to pass it on to other faithful men (2 Timothy 1:13–14; 2:2). His authority in this Dispensation of Grace was made evident while Peter was visiting the church at Antioch. Paul rebuked Peter for going back under the Law and not treating Jews and Gentiles as equals (Galatians 2:11–21). God selected Paul to be the revealer of the doctrine of the Mystery in this Dispensation of Grace. Peter now had to play by Paul's rules, as given to him by Jesus Christ. Paul had been given his authority and a new message by God, and the other apostles and prophets alive at that time affirmed that this was the case (Ephesians 3:1–6). Now they had to learn to live by these new rules in a new dispensation, not by changing what they had been teaching (the Gospel of the Kingdom), but by giving Paul preference and full control over all those who followed him in salvation under the Gospel of Grace. Those saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom were still meeting and being encouraged by the Disciples, mostly within the Hebrew church at Jerusalem, but they were no longer adding new kingdom believers to their assembly. Paul was not going out to trample on the work already done by Peter, who was an apostle to the circumcision (Romans 15:20; Galatians 2:8), but was going out preaching the Gospel of Grace outside of where Peter and the Disciples had already preached the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Paul as masterbuilder

The reason that Paul can hold himself out as our example is because he is our apostle (Romans 11:13; 1 Timothy 1:1). As our apostle, he was given a unique message and a special position as our masterbuilder. In construction, an architect draws up the plans which are given to a general contractor to complete. If there were more than one general contractor on a building site there would be much confusion over who is to be followed. Paul was assigned to be the general contractor who was carrying out the plans drawn up by the Architect, God. He drew up the plans before the foundation of the world, but kept these plans

completely hidden from mankind until revealed to the apostle Paul (Ephesians 1:4; 3:5; 1 Corinthians 2:9–10; Romans 16:25–26).

As a masterbuilder Paul was laying out the base of the building with Christ as the cornerstone. When Ephesians 2:20 is put together with 1 Corinthians 3:10 and Matthew 16:18–19, we see a common foundation (Christ) with two different buildings. Peter was given the authority over building one structure for the Kingdom, and Paul was given charge of building the structure for the Body of Christ. These two structures have two separate plans drawn up by the same Architect, God. Peter was just as much a masterbuilder as Paul, but he is working on another building site. When God temporarily issued a stop work order to Peter, I believe with the stoning of Stephen, he was no longer actively recruiting for his team of workers because construction was halted by God. Around this same time, Paul was raised up to begin working on building the structure for the Body of Christ. Paul carefully instructs us to build only on the foundation he has built. We are not to look at Peter's blueprints (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and books following Paul's epistles) and try to build based on those instructions. Think of the chaos that would ensue if there were two master builders using two sets of building plans at a construction site, even if there were only one foundation to build upon. This is exactly what is happening today by those who bring in Peter's plans to construct a building at Paul's building site. Even worse, people pick and choose between two different blueprints. They mix in a little of Peter's plan with a little bit of Paul's and come up with something that resembles neither one. This is the confusion that has overtaken most churches today. Clarity of purpose for the Church, the Body of Christ, can only be found in Paul's doctrine.

We are builders

All believers are called builders. However, since Paul is our general contractor, we need to follow his orders. This means that we are following the plans that were given to him by the Architect, God. As people who are building a structure designed by God, we need to be very careful to follow the blueprints, the 13 books of Paul. If we use the wrong set of blueprints then we will be building the wrong structure.

We can build things that are eternal and things that are temporal. When we build according to the correct doctrine, those things will last. When we build using the wrong doctrine, those things will not stand the test of fire. For instance, if we follow Peter's demand to follow the Law and be baptized, that work will count for nothing. However, if we have been faithful to Pauline doctrine, we will bear fruit with eternal significance. God does not judge a person on sincerity because they can be sincerely wrong.

Gold, silver, and jewels are items that man can't produce. However, man can produce as much wood, hay, and stubble as needed. One is from God, the other is from man. When we are building correctly, allowing God to work through us, then we are building with gold, silver, and precious gems. When we work in our own power, God considers that worthless and it will be burned up at our judgment.

Works judged by fire

God gave us His word as the standard by which we will be judged so that we know specifically what He expects of us. This is why Israel was given the Mosaic Law, so that the nation of Israel knew what God expected of them. This is why Paul tells us that we need to understand the mystery of His will so that we will walk in a manner pleasing to Him (Colossians 1:9–10). Our works will be held up to Scripture. Those works which don't stand up to what God said in His word will be burned up. God's word is the fire by which our works will be judged. As workmen, we need to find what God desires of us and then take action. We find God's will for us in Paul's writings, which is why we need to rightly divide Scripture (2 Timothy 2:15). When we are judged, our work will be made evident by being held up to God's word.

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