

Building a Church that Lasts

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] I encourage you to open the Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 3. That was our second reading on page 927. And this is part of a sermon series that we began three weeks ago on the first six or so chapters of 1 Corinthians.

And let's pray. God our Father, we pray that the truth and wisdom of the gospel of Christ crucified will not only inform our minds but reform our lives and transform us into the image of your Son. For his glory we pray. Amen. Well, if you read the newspapers, it looks like the Anglican Church worldwide is falling apart and dividing.

Last month and the beginning of this month was the Lambeth Conference, a 10-year event for all the bishops of the Anglican Church. However, this time there were a couple or handful of bishops that were not invited and well over 200 who boycotted the conference.

And what was seen to be a sort of rival conference was set up in Jerusalem at the end of June. And over 200 bishops went to that, but others as well.

[1 : 18] Ministers, lay people, spouses and so on. Well over 1,000 people attended that conference. As we look at it, the Anglican Church is deeply divided over issues of theology and issues of ethical practice as well.

I guess for many onlookers who are not part of the Anglican Church or not Christians, they sort of look on a bit confused perhaps, thinking, well, if Christians are meant to be people of peace and love and unity, why can't they all get on and be all part of one happy family?

We might even appeal to the Apostle Paul here in 1 Corinthians 3, in fact, where he's dealing with divisions in the church and seeking to bring a unity between those who are factionalized or fractured in their fellowship.

Indeed, the heading, it's not Paul's heading, but a modern editor's heading on chapter 3, as you can see, is on divisions in the Corinthian church. And Paul is certainly appalled at the divisions that are happening in the church at Corinth.

The Corinthian church was boasting in its spirituality. And as a result of their spiritual experiences, they thought that that was a mark and a sign of spiritual maturity and superiority.

[2 : 35] And in fact, it seems from this letter that they were rather dismissive of Paul, who had founded the church in Corinth a few years before, and they were dismissive of him because what he taught them and preached to them was, they thought, just like milk.

It was like baby food. And they've moved on. They've graduated into something better, more mature, more superior, it seems. Paul has defended that in the passages we've seen last week in particular, and again today as well.

He argued last week that we saw that what he proclaims to them is in fact spiritual maturity, the gospel of Christ crucified, and that that is revealed by God's spirit.

It is not simple baby food, but actually something that is wise and for the mature. Now he goes on defending himself and arguing that in fact it's not he who's just been at the simple level, but in fact the Corinthians themselves, who boast in their maturity and superiority, have themselves been rather simple.

And that to them, Paul has had to speak words of baby food, spiritually speaking, rather than solid food. What he says at the beginning is, and so brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, that is natural or unspiritual people, as infants in Christ.

[4 : 09] He's not denying that they're Christian, but that they've barely moved in their faith. And so actually they're at the very baby end of spiritual life in Christ.

So I fed you with milk, not solid food. If you were not ready for solid food, even now you're still not ready. Now the evidence for this is not a lack of understanding, although that's part of it that he's been correcting in the previous two chapters, but also a moral deficiency.

He says in verse three, for the reason that you're not yet ready is that you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving according to human inclinations?

Well, these days our world loves spirituality. The spirituality sections of bookshops are popular.

There are spiritual bookshops around. Rarely though are they strong in Christian books.

That is, spirituality is attractive and popular in our world, but a world that still at the same time shuns Christian spirituality. The basic reason for that, it's a bit like the trap that the Corinthians seem to have fallen into, is that Christian spirituality demands a high moral standard.

[5 : 34] That is, an experience of God and his gospel leads us to godliness and disciplined life of holiness. That's not what people want. People are happy to have spiritual experience and think that they have spiritual empathy or wisdom or maturity, but they stand well away from the moral demands of Christian spirituality.

And that seems to be in part what's happening for the Corinthians. It's the same in our world on the issue of wisdom. Our world loves to think that it's wise, that it's so clever and ingenious.

It's often boastful about its wisdom and human power and ingenuity. And yet at the same time, it shuns true wisdom, the wisdom of the gospel of Christ crucified.

Paul certainly argued and dealt with that issue at length in the previous two chapters. He's dealing still with it in part, but now also the issue of spirituality as well.

The Corinthian mistake is that they thought that they were wise, they thought that they were spiritual, they thought that they were spiritually superior and mature based on some experiences that they have had.

[6 : 50] But it's failed to lead them into a greater understanding of the gospel of Christ, as Paul has corrected them last week. And it's failed to lead them to a high degree of godliness or holiness, as he implies in verse 3.

For there's quarreling and jealousy among you. That's human behavior, that's fleshly, worldly behavior. If you truly are spiritual people, then your morality will change.

Your ethical standards will change. That is, the gospel of Christ crucified leads to godliness and holiness. It's not a simple baby food message of Jesus on a cross.

It's the profoundest wisdom, as well as being power for godliness and holiness. The Corinthian mistake is that they've taken a spiritual experience and thought that that means that they are wise, mature, and in the deep things of God.

Not so, is what Paul is arguing throughout this letter. Now, the division of the Corinthian church at this time revolved around personal leaders and preferences for those leaders.

[8 : 05] Paul is the one who planted and started the church in Corinth. He was followed then by Apollos, a colleague, who developed and built on Paul's foundation, in effect, and continued the growing of the church in Corinth.

But of their divisions, Paul says in verse 4, For when one says, I belong to Paul, and another, I belong to Apollos, are you not merely human?

That's how the world thinks. The sort of cult of celebrity and hero worship. That's what the Corinthians were falling into. A division between Paul and Apollos.

And Paul demolishes that division in the words ahead. Because he says, Apollos and he worked together, they're servants together for the same purpose under God, different roles in that purpose, but there's no competition between them.

So he says in verse 5, What then is Apollos and what is Paul? Merely servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each.

[9 : 11] I planted, Apollos watered, but actually as Paul, in a sense, puts down the significance of human ministry, it is God who gives the growth.

That is, to divide yourself between Paul and Apollos is a complete misunderstanding of the role of God and the role of God's spirit in giving growth. It actually shows your worldliness and your spiritual immaturity to divide at this point.

I planted, Apollos watered, but it's God who gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is actually anything apart from being servants of God's gospel.

Only God who gives the growth is something. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.

For we are God's servants, working together, not in competition, not divided. You're God's field, God's building. It's God who's done this. It's God who's planted and given the growth.

[10:16] God's the one who's worked. Paul, Apollos, are mere servants together under God's purpose for the Corinthian church. Now what we need to notice here is what Paul is saying.

He's not arguing for a unity at any cost. There should be a unity because Paul and Apollos are colleagues together for the same gospel.

They have preached, proclaimed, and ministered, and pastored the same gospel of Christ crucified. There is no division between them other than a difference of role.

So to express a preference that, well, I belong to Paul, well, I belong to Apollos, is completely worldly thinking. It's a complete misunderstanding and misapplication of the role of ministry and the role of the gospel.

And it's a denial, in fact, of the work of God through Paul and through Apollos. However, Paul goes on then to warn about wrong ministry.

[11:23] Apollos and Paul, he's saying, we built the same foundation of Christ crucified and built on that foundation. However, not everyone who ministers or leads a church does what is right.

And so in the paragraph that follows, there's an implied warning, not about Apollos, not at all, but about some who've come or are threatening to mislead or take over the Corinthian church and build falsely a ministry there.

Some might build on other foundations. Paul says in verses 10 and 11, according to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation and someone else is building on it. Maybe Apollos, but maybe more generally is what Paul's referring to. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid. That foundation is Jesus Christ. That's the gospel that Paul has enunciated so clearly in chapters 1 and 2.

[12:35] Christ crucified. But building on, so there will be some who may try to build another invalid foundation and they or others might try to build with the wrong materials on the foundation of Paul and Apollos.

So he says of them in verses 12 to 15, if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, the work of each builder will become visible for the day will disclose it. That is the day of the Lord's return, the day of judgment because it will be revealed with fire and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder receives a reward.

If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss. The builder will be saved but only as through fire. Now again, we need to be careful and note what Paul is saying here.

The rhetoric of unity can bedevil the church as indeed it seems to be doing. It seems to me, reading from afar, that the main quest of the Lambeth Conference was to see how can we stay together as a worldwide communion.

[13:57] If that is the driving force, it's actually a disastrous priority in theory and in practice. For while Christian unity is a fundamental priority, it must be a unity that is grounded in the truth of the gospel.

And that's what Paul is saying here. That if someone comes to build on a different foundation, well, that work is invalid. If someone comes to build on a foundation but builds with only wood or hay or straw, that is things that will be burned up, well, that's also bad.

That is, it's not a Christian unity at any cost. Paul and Apollos have a fundamental unity in the gospel. And that's why the divisions in Corinth are so bad.

But if it's a division over a different gospel, then that's a division that a unity is a pretense. It's a false unity.

That's the implication of what Paul is saying here. Paul has laid a foundation, but it's not a foundation of any view of Jesus or any view of salvation.

[15:07] It's very clear that the foundation is Christ crucified, the sufficiency of Jesus' death for the forgiveness of the sins of the world, for those who believe and trust in him.

Paul's made that very clear in the early chapters of this letter. Christ crucified, foolishness to the world, but it's the wisdom and the power of God. That's the foundation of the church.

It's the only valid foundation. And those who build on a different foundation or build something else on this foundation that distorts it, that's an invalid unity.

in the church. What seems to be at risk here and why Paul is writing this letter in part is that some in Corinth, maybe they've come in or from within, are seeking to change and distort the foundation of Paul and Apollos of the gospel in Corinth.

They're building with wood, hay and straw. Paul listed in that verse, verse 12, builders could build with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw.

[16:16] Seems of those six things, the latter three would be consumed readily by fire. That's the test that Paul goes on in that paragraph to say. Whereas gold, silver, precious stones would endure.

Paul seems to be making a comparison between two types of building. What is valid and lasting and what is not. What will be consumed. And the real test of course is the final day.

The day of Jesus' return. The day when he will come to judge the living and the dead. The language of this passage is the language of a building.

Indeed, the background of the language is in particular the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament. For especially in the heart of the Old Testament temple, gold, silver and precious stones were significant.

They were there as part of the ornamentation as well as part of the garb of the high priest when he would enter the most holy place. In fact, when Paul calls himself a skilled master builder in verse 10, he's using an expression very similar to the man Bezalel who builds the tabernacle in the book of Exodus at Mount Sinai.

[17:31] given the gift of wisdom or skill to be a master builder. But Paul, of course, is not talking fundamentally about buildings but rather about people.

Periodically, people come and they're visitors here at Holy Trinity on a Sunday or midweek and often they'll say, oh, what a beautiful church you have. Well, apart from the fact that I make it clear that I don't have it, it's not mine, I actually respond along the lines of, well, I don't know about that, some are beautiful but some are pretty ugly, you know.

And they look at me with this puzzled look thinking that I'm an odd eccentric, which I probably am. But of course, the church you see is not the building. You have a beautiful church here, well, that's what the world thinks.

But actually, it's the people who are the church. And whether we're beautiful or ugly on the outside, that actually doesn't matter in the end either. Paul, of course, is referring to people here.

It's why he goes on to say in verse 16, do you not know that you are God's temple? That is, again, the temple tabernacle language that he's referred to or used by allusion in the previous paragraph.

[18:44] You are God's temple. He's not talking about a building of bricks and gold, literally. He's talking about people, Christians. And God's spirit dwells in you.

That's what makes us God's temple. And if anyone destroys God's temple, he says in verse 17, God will destroy that person. You see, Paul is warning the Corinthians here not to be destroyed by false teachers who build either a different foundation or wield with the wrong materials on the foundation that Paul and Apollos have laid.

For God's temple is holy and you are that temple. That is, the gospel foundation leads to godliness and holiness. It has a moral demand about it.

It's not about a spiritual experience only, which is what the Corinthians seemed to have boasted in. Rather, it's about morality and ethics producing in us by God's spirit the image of the Lord Jesus in character.

Now, one of the deficiencies of the English language is that if I were to say to you, will you stand up? In your mind you think, well, who am I referring to?

[20:06] Do I mean you, Frank, individually, or do I mean all of you, people? So it is in verse 16, if we were German readers or ancient Greek when it was written originally or French or I think even in Chinese and certainly in Burmese, it would be clear.

But we who are Western, modern English speakers, the word you is a bit ambiguous and because we think so individualistically, we often will get this verse wrong.

Paul says, do you plural, the church, the people together, you together, you people, are God's temple. and yes, whilst it's true that the Holy Spirit dwells in each Christian individually, Paul's point is not that an individual is the temple of God, but that the church, the people, are the temple of God.

When I was teaching in Burma the week before last, one of my students asked me in passing, really, he'd been challenged by a Christian friend who said, well, I don't really need to go to church and I don't go to church because I am the temple of God because his spirit dwells in me. And he asked me, how would I respond? I responded exactly what I've just said. The verse that's crucial is this, and it's you plural. That is, we are the church together.

[21 : 30] And so sitting apart from the church and thinking, well, I can just sit at home and I'm a, that's not what God has in mind for the church or for Christians. We're actually built together as the living temple of God.

And other passages in the New Testament make that perhaps even clearer, such as in Ephesians 2 and 1 Peter 2 as well. Well, as I've said at the beginning, the Anglican church is bitterly divided. There are plenty who teach and preach who do not believe in the divinity of Jesus. There are plenty who teach and preach who do not believe in the resurrection, who do not believe the sufficiency of Jesus' death on the cross, who deny vehemently the substitutionary atonement that the Bible teaches.

And there are certainly plenty who deny and preach and promote a very different morality and ethic from what the Bible teaches. Many of them regard evangelicals like me as being very foolish and lightweight, naive and simple.

Well, it seems to me that too many are building with wood and hay and straw. And the real test will be the day of the Lord's return. What will stand and what will be consumed.

[22 : 52] But too much of the church, and not just the Anglican church either, but that's what we belong to, is actually made of quite inflammable material, it seems to me.

And the fire of God's judgment on that day will lead to much destruction, sadly. That's the real test, the final day, not a Lambeth conference or any other conference.

What matters is the materials that the church is being built with. Is it the gold of the gospel or the wood of worldly wisdom?

Is it the silver message of the cross or is it the hay of heresy? Is it the precious stones of purity or the straw of sinfulness?

It's a big difference. Paul is not papering over a false unity here. Unity is a priority for Christians, where it's a unity grounded on the foundation of the gospel of Christ crucified.

[24 : 03] But any other foundation, any other gospel, any other message, that's not unity. We shouldn't pretend for such unity at all. And it will be very clear on that final day, the day of judgment, what will stand and what will not.

Paul's call, you see, is not for unity regardless. And that's the modern rhetoric in Christian circles around the world, not just in Anglican, is we've got to pretend to have a great, big, happy unity of those who call themselves Christian.

But the unity of the New Testament is much more defined than that. It's a unity grounded in the gospel of Christ crucified, a unity that produces Christ-like godliness and holiness. holiness. And that's what Paul was striving for. And that's what he was fighting for. And the model of this letter and the model of Paul's approach to the Corinthians also is a challenge to us.

It shows us that the church is worth fighting for. Paul was contending that the Corinthian church would remain standing and growing on the truth of the gospel of Christ crucified, on godly wisdom and power.

[25 : 23] He was fighting for it so that it wouldn't be taken away onto a different foundation, so that it wouldn't be built with wood or hay or straw. He considered, rightly, that the church is worth the effort.

And so it is. Because the church is so important in the plan, the eternal plan, of God's gospel. It's why Jesus died, for the church.

You see, fundamentally, we belong together. It's not just us as an individual. Our individualistic thinking so often distorts what the Bible is teaching us.

It's us together, the church of God's faithful people built on the foundation of Christ crucified and growing in the likeness of Christ. That's what God is on about. It's why Jesus died.

And if Paul thought it was worth fighting for, so should we. That we think the church is worth fighting for, not for the sake of pretending that we're one happy, unified family, but so that those who are errant, those who are building with wood and hay and straw, will be brought to build with gold and silver and precious stones.

[26 : 31] That those who are building on a different foundation are brought to build on the right foundation. And that those who are being led astray by false builders and planters will come to place themselves on the right foundation and grow the right way.

God is not blasé about the church. He takes it very seriously, more so than we ever do. When he says in verse 17, if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person, is a statement of a very loving and serious protector.

They are words of very strong warning against false teachers and preachers of whom sadly there are so many in our world today, as indeed there were in Paul's day and every day in between. You destroy God's people and I will destroy you, is what he's saying. See, it's not unity at any cost. There's a high moral demand and a high gospel demand in the spirituality of the Christian faith. That's why Paul concludes with the exhortation, do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, which is very often the boast of some parts of the Christian church today, you should become fools so that you may become wise.

[28 : 05] For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For he's written, he catches the wise in their craftiness and again the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise that they are futile. So let no one boast about human leaders.

That's worldly wisdom. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Kephass or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all belong to you and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

Paul is appealing to the Corinthians here not to have a false division dividing between two faithful leaders, but he's also been warning them to recognise where they are being led in this worldly wisdom and the celebrity cult, Paul or Apollos.

They're being led to a different foundation and being built by different means, by false teachers. That's a division that must be kept. But the division between Paul and Apollos is a myth and he's urging them back to a godly unity.

unity. Well, there are warnings to us here. Christian unity, so called, is not so simply the top priority.

[29 : 15] The right foundation is more fundamental. Unity is grounded in that. A unity of the gospel and a unity of the godliness that the gospel promotes.

And that's what Paul is arguing for here. he's warning us on the final day. What will our foundation be? What will we be built of?

Gold, silver, precious stones, that is, the gospel of Christ crucified? Or will we be built on some other foundation of wood and hay and straw that will be burned up in judgment on that day?

That's the day of the test. Not a Lambeth conference. It doesn't really matter in one sense if the Christian church or Anglican communion divides. If it divides over issues of truth and godliness, then it's a right division, one that should be encouraged and not averted.

That's what Paul is saying here. Well, let us pray as we conclude this section. O God, our Father, we pray for your church in this world.

[30 : 25] Lord, we pray that in your mercy and power, you will reform it according to the truth of your gospel of Christ crucified. Lord God, you warn very seriously that if anyone destroys your temple, you'll destroy that person.

Please, Lord God, prevent faithful people from being led astray into heresy or immorality by false teachers. Restrain such people, block their influence, preserve and guard, protect and build your church as you promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against it and so that on the foundation of Christ crucified, it will stand on the final day.

We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen.