

Working with and for God

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[0 : 00] Let us turn back to the passage that we read. And we may read at verse 8, 1 Corinthians chapter 3, and reading at verse 8, He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. When I received a phone call from Mr. McLeod to say that he was indisposed and unable to take this morning's service, I considered delving into my archives to preach on something on which I had already preached recently.

But then I thought that I should seek to minimize disruption as much as possible, and that I should attempt to preach from the same passage and use the same psalms as already in your service details bulletin.

However, what I cannot do is bring you Mr. McLeod's thoughts on the passage. And so I'd like to set a few scattered thoughts before you, which I trust the Lord will bless to us all.

Three headings from the first part of the passage up to verse 9. First, the seed of dissension. Secondly, the source of spiritual growth.

[1 : 49] And thirdly, spiritual waters. The seed of dissension. It is obvious from this letter and the passage that we read, that matters were not as they should be in the church at Corinth.

Paul the apostle was not just an excellent teacher, but he was also an extremely caring pastor. He was concerned about the factions that were threatening the very existence of the church at Corinth.

People were identifying with various figures. And I am sure in every age that people have their own favorite preachers.

It reminds me of a time very early in my ministry when I was a visiting minister at communion services in this island.

In that particular congregation, there were three visiting ministers at communion services. And on Sunday evening, one of the ministers returned from his engagement and seemed rather discouraged.

[3 : 07] I asked him what the matter was. And in reply, he asked me, Were certain people present where you were preaching?

Why do you ask? Well, he said, A number of people asked me after the morning service, and neither of us had been preaching at the morning service, where I would be preaching in the evening.

I don't know, but I suppose he was flattered by their apparent interest. I told them, he said, where I was to be, but they were not there.

While being more aware and more familiar with island traits and characteristics than he was, I told them that the purpose of the question was to ascertain not where he was preaching, but where he was not preaching.

I assured them that this was not done out of any malicious wish to boycott him, but that by a process of elimination, those who were asking the question could determine where they would hear the particular minister that they favored.

[4 : 25] Now, I hasten to add that I was not in that category. But in Corinth, the situation was much more serious than that.

Their idolizing of various figures had caused huge problems. So much so, that rather than promote unity, that is, after all, what the gospel ought to be doing.

There were very marked divisions in this church. Yet, the Bible lays huge emphasis on unity. Remember how the psalmist places emphasis on this in Psalm 133.

Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. Now, I tend to think of unity for some reason as being feminine.

Maybe that says more about me than anything else. I know we are living in a day where an agenda has been pushed, but I am not a fan of that agenda, for I believe it runs counter to the teaching of Scripture.

[5 : 42] Unity, in my view, is a precious child, a well-loved child, but who is rather fragile. Many people, I like to think anyway, have much time for unity.

Yet, there are times when she can be very demanding and trying, and your patience and more besides is severely tested.

But, you know, because she is so fragile, she is very easily broken. Finding the remedy or the cure for restoration or healing is frequently beyond the wit of man.

And we see that, not just in church circles, but we see it in the secular world at large. So, if we love this child unity, let us take great care with her, so that we may enjoy the blessings associated with her.

Because it is there that God has promised His blessing. Where, brethren, dwell in unity.

[7 : 03] And that's very important to take with us. And remember, that's not just an Old Testament teaching. It is also evident in the New Testament. For example, the 17th chapter of John's Gospel in the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus Christ, when He is speaking to His Father in Heaven, and you will remember how reverentially He addressed His Father.

I remember, as a young Christian in this very building, hearing the late Professor John Murray, actually speaking on that chapter.

I was sitting right there on the gallery. I was absolutely mesmerized by the speaker and his teaching. And I guess I fell right into the trap that the people in Corinth fell into in that time.

And I became a Professor Murray fan. But you remember how the Lord addressed the Father, righteous Father, and so on. And you will remember that He prays that all of us, those given to Him, might be one.

He is concerned about the unity of those who have been gifted to Him. that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

[8 : 32] And you see, the offspin of that is that the unity of the brethren has an impact on the world, and an impact on the presentation of the gospel in the world.

And where there is disunity, it also has an impact, but it's a negative one. It's not an impact for good. And it is staggering that the example and basis of Christian unity is the relationship that exists between the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ.

and you could spend eternity trying to understand the depths that exist in that relationship. Well, in the first chapter of his gospel, John writes on the Word, speaking of Christ, the Word was with, or towards God, or face to face with God.

That speaks of the intimacy of relationship that existed between the Father and the Son, the communion. And fellowship that exists between them.

And that's the basis of the unity and fellowship that ought to exist between brothers and sisters in the Christian church. In the first chapter of this letter to the Corinthians, we are told how Paul came to hear of this disturbing news.

[10 : 01] It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ.

And you see, there were not just two factions, but several factions. There was dissension between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians.

The Gentile group claiming to follow Paul. The Jewish group claiming to follow Cephas, or as he is better known, Peter. Then you had the intellectual grouping who claimed to follow the eloquent speaker Apollos.

And you had those who thought they were the spiritually elite. They boasted that they were of Christ. And rather than moving towards the goal of spiritual maturity, they were being bogged down in the swamp of childish disputings as to which group was superior.

The church was becoming fragmented. We live in a fragmented and broken world.

[11 : 20] And the believer is called, as a fellow worker, let me put it even more bluntly, the believer has a duty to speak the message of the cross, to bring the message of the crucified Christ to a broken and fragmented world.

Because that is the only hope for a broken and a fragmented world, the message, the good news of the gospel. To bring the good news of salvation through Christ.

That inevitably means drawing attention to the death of Christ and the purpose of Christ dying. And what Paul was hearing, that the very people who ought to be doing that were themselves suffering from a fragmented mentality.

That's in a fellowship that professes to be built around the cross. Again, one would wish that it were not true today.

But, but, note where Paul heard this. It has been reported to me, he says, by Chloe's people.

[12 : 34] He heard it while ministering in distant Ephesus. What a pathetic advert for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Remember what Christ taught about gospel advertising. And we would do well to take it to heart. my, by this he says, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

That's the kind of gospel advertising that should characterize the church in the world. It was what characterized the early church.

And what led many in the world to take note of the changes that had occurred in the lives of many in the early church. Behold how they love one another.

And so you find Paul writing in scathing terms, giving a devastating critique of the believers' allegiance to Christ.

[13 : 41] Christ is. He died to redeem us and you were set aside to serve as the teaching of Paul. Paul. These divisions then had a huge effect on their lack of spiritual growth.

They were spiritual retarded. But I, brothers, at the beginning of this chapter could not address you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

There was a real deprivation in their spiritual diet. They were still babes. There was an immaturity about them. You know, when you meet a child who is mature beyond their years, you're generally impressed by that and you perhaps praise them for it.

But when you meet an adult who is acting like a child, you tend to pity them for their childish behavior and immaturity. The Corinthians ought to have made progress by now.

But they were still infants in Christ. The seed of dissension then can be traced to their spiritual immaturity.

[14 : 56] And that brings me to my second point, the source of spiritual growth. Because you notice the metaphor changes in the chapter. It changes to an agricultural metaphor.

servants working in the field, sowing and watering. And Paul tells us the field is representative of the church, the people of God.

Where does the growth come from? Does it come from those whom the people identified with? Paul and Apollos and Cephas.

And you notice how Paul demolishes this argument that they are postulating. What then, he says, is Apollos?

What is Paul? You know, he is not saying who is Apollos or who is Paul.

[16 : 00] But what is Apollos and what is Paul? And he answers his own question, servants. servants, servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.

And Paul wants to help us understand how true Christian growth takes place. And he begins by discrediting their notions about their favorite preachers.

things. There is since the fall a tendency to idolize in the heart of man. You see it in the world of politics, you see it in the world of music, you see it in the world of sport, and sadly you see it where you wouldn't expect to find it in the life of the church.

It ought not to be in the life of the church, and that is what Paul is dealing with. Don't you wish you could say it has been erased from the life of the church?

And you have to again say but. And you notice it's as if Paul is for want of a better word is depersonalizing himself and Apollos.

[17 : 21] As I said he doesn't ask who then is Apollos or who then is Paul. What? Is Apollos and what is Paul? What sort of thing are they?

And then he topples them from the pedestal on which the Corinthians had begun to place them. They are only servants he says. Agricultural laborers if you like.

That's all they are. Obedient servants. Faithful servants. Because they are servants they merely carry out the instruction of their master.

they are merely instruments in the hands of another. They are instruments in the hand of God.

God has many laborers. Some are planting others are watering. But all are engaged in the work of the growth of the church.

[18 : 25] are all engaged in the work of agriculture to keep to the metaphor that is here. It's the Lord who made use of Apollos.

It's the Lord who made use of Paul in the lives of the Corinthians in different ways to bring them to Jesus Christ. And so that is where our attention needs to rest.

Not on man, not on preachers, however tempting that might be, but on the Lord whose servants they are. Do you remember how that is powerfully illustrated for us by John in his gospel writing of John the Baptist?

John the Baptist's disciples, they were beginning to resent the popularity of this new figure, Jesus Christ, who had appeared on the scene.

Clouds were flocking to him. They were jealous, for the reputation of John the Baptist. And you remember how John the Baptist responded to his disciples, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.

[19 : 45] The one who has the bride is the bridegroom, the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him. He rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore, this joy of mine is now complete.

He must increase, but I must decrease. Don't you just love how John the Baptist responded to these disciples?

He had learned the lesson of not being intoxicated with self. All he had received, his position, his teaching, his baptizing, had been given to him.

He was but the instrument, the vehicle, the channel that God used. And like John the Baptist, Paul had no desire to be exalted, but only to see Christ exalted, and to see Christ at the forefront of the lives of those to whom he preached.

He clearly understood that what matters is not the one who preaches, but the one who is preached. that's what is important.

[21 : 02] Magnifying Christ and his death on the cross was the burning passion and the driving force of Paul's life. And you remember how he himself summarized this in the second letter to the Corinthians.

He told us what it was that motivated him to go out with the message of the gospel and with the passion with which he declared the message of the gospel. for the love of Christ controls us.

That was the motivating power that governed the actions and the ministry of the apostle Paul. Controls us because we have concluded this that one has died for all.

Therefore all have died. And he died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sakes died and was raised.

And that ought to be the motivating factor in the life of every child of grace, the power of divine, of Christ's love.

[22 : 11] Paul returns to this same teaching later on in this letter in the very next chapter. For who sees anything different in you, he says, what do you have that you did not receive?

I, if then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? In other words, if you have been given special gifts, they have been given by God.

And we ought to boast not in the gifts, but in the God who has given the gifts. That is the emphasis of the apostle. And so he says in verse 6 and 7, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth, so neither he who plants nor he waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

It is not Paul or Apollos that you and I ought to be focused on. They neither caused your Christian life to begin, he says to the Corinthians, nor can they make it grow.

Yes, they were instrumental as servants of God in planting the seed. They watered the seed of the word. They preached and taught and pastored and shepherded and disciplined, but they did not fertilize the seed.

[23 : 29] They did not create a life in the seed that germinated in your heart and in your soul. Where does the growth come from?

Where does the life come from? Where should you look for grace when you have failed to thrive? life? When by God's grace we come to see that our Christian lives have been stunted and immature, to whom do we turn for new life?

To whom do we turn for a growth spurt, as it were? Paul says, God gave the growth in the past. And note in verse 7 the change of tense.

God still gives the growth in the gospel. He still gives the growth. There is an emphasis on the source of growth.

It's the sole prerogative of God. Don't look to man for the grace that only God can give you. Don't look to ministers for life that only the Lord can supply.

- [24 : 43] While you boast in Paul or boast in Apollos, that's what they were doing. I wonder what would be the equivalent today? Well, I suppose whoever your favorite preacher might be, and because of advances in technology, you can roam the world and listen to ministers from across the globe.

your favorite teacher, your favorite preacher may be a global figure, but the truth is, says Paul, we are all one. He who plants, he who waters, are one.

They have the same aid, the same purpose in you, the advancement of God's kingdom, the glory of God in the world.

salvation, of men and women and boys and girls. So the source of spiritual life, of spiritual growth is God alone, the seed of dissension, immaturity, finally, spiritual workers.

And Paul here uses, makes a staggering claim, we are God's fellow workers. It's an amazing claim, isn't it?

- [26 : 10] Does the great I am, does he need co-workers or fellow workers? And the answer that scripture gives us, yes he does.

He uses them to carry out his purpose in the spread of the gospel. Remember how we gave, how Jesus gave the great commission, prior to his ascension, to his disciples.

And he proclaimed the authority that belonged to him, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.

He is empowering them to go out. Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to himself all that I have commanded you.

And then there is this note of encouragement. Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

- [27 : 15] And you know, if you are engaged in the propagation of the gospel, there will inevitably be many days of discouragement, many days of despondency.

people, but to know that you have this person with you, even in the darkest days, even in the blue days, that he is with you to the end of the age, is a source of tremendous encouragement.

Divine wisdom uses the foolishness of preaching to achieve this goal, and weak, frail, sinful messengers to propagate the message.

Because God, as Paul reminds us, chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, and God chose what is low and despised in the world even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are.

Why? That no human being might boast in the presence of God. Let me give one example from the Bible of a fellow worker of God.

- [28 : 37] She was a woman, ostracized in her own community because of her lifestyle. That's why she came to Jacob's well in the middle of the day when no one else was likely to be there.

A solitary woman whose life was dramatically turned around through a pre-ordered meeting with the Savior Jesus Christ.

Christ. And as a consequence of that meeting she came under new management. She abandoned her water jar, the symbol of her former way of life.

She left that behind. And she rushes back to the community where she resided. and she cannot suppress the message that is bubbling up inside it.

She cannot conceal it. She tells others what Christ has done for her. And her zeal is particularly moving, I think, when you consider her standing, or perhaps I should say, her lack of standing in the community.

[30 : 00] What methodology did she employ? What strategy did she use? We're not told. But she simply did three things.

She set before her fellow residents who Christ was. Come see a man who told me all that I ever did. She points to him. He is the one, she declares, who found me.

He is the one who knows more about me than I know even about myself. He knows more about me than I want anyone to know about me.

That's the first thing she did. And the second thing she did is she tells what Jesus had done for her. This is a man that told me all that I ever did.

She tells them what Jesus had done for her. She tells this to the whole community. And the third thing she does she invites them to come to Jesus and to share, to find and to share in what she has found.

[31 : 11] And if you come to him she says to them you'll find them to be the same as I have found them. That's all she did. And you might ask me is that all that it takes?

And it's a fair enough question to ask. It's not all that it takes and the answer I would give to that is yes or no. Yes in the sense that it doesn't take great eloquence to spread the message of the truth.

You don't need a doctorate to do it. You don't need seminary training. You don't even need twenty years of Bible study to be able to tell someone else of what Jesus has done for you.

This woman told others what Jesus had done for her. But that's not all. For when she said what he had done she spoke out of an overflowing heart.

She spoke out of a heart that's fallen in love perhaps for the very first time with a person who had captivated her soul.

[32 : 41] She speaks from a transformed life. She speaks from a heart controlled and motivated by the Holy Spirit of God.

And her fellow residents could see that there was something now about this woman that was very different to the past. That's all that it takes.

Transformed lives by the Spirit of God to be fellow workers with God. These are the kind of instruments that God uses.

He uses personal evangelism. You remember how John tells us of how Andrew rushed back to tell Peter.

And you can almost hear the note of excitement in the declaration that he makes. We have found the Messiah. God is not extraordinary how the testimony of this woman was blessed and used by the Lord to bring about revival in Samaria.

[34 : 06] You are God's field, Paul says, all in the same team, working together in God's field as his fellow neighbors. what an honor and what a privilege to be a co-wasker with the Lord.

Growth is his business and it comes from him. He alone brings the growth.

And so to sum up the fellow wasker, can you say hand on heart today that you are a fellow worker with God? Because in my view the fellow worker is faithful, is humble, is conscious of their dependency on the aid and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The fellow worker is controlled by the love of Christ. The fellow worker is unable to suppress the news of what Christ has done for them.

The fellow worker seeks to avoid division and looks at all times to the one who alone gives the increase. The fellow worker does not look on mission as a chore but a privilege.

[35 : 32] can you and I say today that we too are fellow workers with God?

Or are you still an infant who ought to have grown up long ago? I wonder is it because you are still looking to man for what only God in Christ by his Spirit can give to you?

Or are you present today and you're not an immature Christian or a fellow worker but you're just carrying out your normal Sunday routine and you come to church on a Sunday morning?

How my friend have you asked Christ, the Christ of the Bible, to come into your heart so that your Sunday duty becomes a pleasure and one of the highlights of your week?

The seed of dissension, spiritual immaturity. The source of spiritual growth, God alone promotes growth. Spiritual workers, faithful, obedient servants, these are the ones who are rewarded at the end of the day.

[37 : 07] Let us pray. O eternal God, help us to learn from thy truth. Help us to take it to heart, to practice it in old lives, that we might know the blessing that is associated by being involved in the work of the kingdom alongside with the one who gives growth, and the glory shall be thine.

In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. Amen. Let us conclude by singing from Psalm 126, page 419.

Psalm 136, and the tune is Lingham.

When Zion's bondage God turned back, as men that dreamed were we, then filled with laughter was our mouth, our tongue with melody.

They among the heathen said, The Lord great things for them hath wrought, the Lord hath done great things for us, whence joy to us is brought.

[38 : 32] Streams of water in the south. Now the streams of water were falling in a very dry area in the Negev.

Our bondage Lord recall, whose soul and tears are reaping time of joy, and joy they shall. That man who bearing precious seed and going forth doth mourn, he doubtless bringing back his sheaves, rejoicing shall return.

And you know, the temptation is to believe that the preacher is the man bearing the precious seed. I think in the first instance, that belongs to Jesus Christ.

he is the one who truly rejoices in the return of the sheaves that have grown from the seed sown. Let us sing the whole psalm, when Zion's bondage God turned black.

When Zion's bondage God turned black, as he has been weary, as he has been weary, then filled with laughter was our love, our song with melody, our song with melody, our song with melody, our song with melody.

[40 : 14] Aim one for he said the Lord, great things for them of Lord, great things for they have brought, the Lord hath done great things for us, when joy to us is known, when joy to us is known, when joy to us is known, when joy to us is known.

God has seen the water in the south, our bondage glory call, our bondage glory call, who so in tears are we in time, of joy and joy to the show, all joy and joy the show, all joy and joy the show, all joy and joy they shall.

God, mother, in flesh shall see, and going forth of morn, and going forth and more, he does bring him back his sheep, rejoicing shall return, rejoicing shall return, rejoicing shall return, rejoicing shall return.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit, rest on and abide with you all, now and forever.

Amen.