

Study 4: 1st Corinthians Chapter 3

Introduction

Paul is still addressing the fragmentation issue in this chapter. The Corinthians were not being effective in the building work that they were undertaking (in building their lives for God) and the power play was destroying the things that they were doing. They were so immature that they couldn't grasp some of the fundamental issues, let alone going on to maturity.

Body of the Study

How mature are the Corinthians?

What are the signs of the immaturity?

Was there division between Paul and the other leaders?

The second example

The third example

Where true wisdom lies

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *Paul discusses worldly wisdom again (1:3:19). What should we do about this (and how should we do it)?*
- *Paul uses the example of people building their lives around gold, silver, precious jewels, and wood, hay, and straw. What are the things in your life that fall into the first group, and which ones fall into the second group?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 4 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 4: Chapter 3

Introduction

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Body of the Study

How mature are the Corinthians?

Paul has made comments about maturity in the last chapter (1:2:6), and then made the comparison between those who are *spiritual* and those who are *worldly (carnal)*. Now he makes the direct application – the Corinthians have not gone on to maturity, and instead of being *spiritual*, they are *carnal!*

They were still babes in Christ. On the surface, we would just say that they hadn't grown to the maturity that they should have reached. But we need to remember that Paul had spent 18 months there with them – and wouldn't have left them *in a mess* (in fact the mess that they were now in). Further, he had left them with the miraculous gifts that should have allowed them to grow and mature. But in the 4 years since Paul had left, things had gone from bad to worse. Notice that Paul said “...*I fed you with milk...*” (past tense) as he refers to the time when he was there. They *were* babes, and they *should* have grown. Instead of reaching the maturity and wanting the solid meat, he says “...*until now you were unable to digest it...and even now you still can't...*” (1:3:2).

The illustration of milk – the food that babies would eat – compared to solid food, is used several times in the New Testament (Heb 5:11-13; 1 Pet 2:2). There are some fundamental principles that we need to understand as christians (the Hebrew writer spells them out for us in the first few verses of chapter 6, following on from what he has said about milk). As christians, we need to grasp these issues and then go on to the deeper issues.

What are the signs of the immaturity?

The divisions amongst the Corinthians is just one sign of their immaturity, and Paul brings them right back to that in 1:3:4 “...*when you say 'I am of Paul' or 'I am of Apollos'...*” it is showing their immaturity. But it is further encompassed in their behaviour – behaviour that a mature christian should have grown beyond. Having the cliques is one thing, but it has led to “...*envy, strife, and divisions...*”.

Was there division between Paul and the other leaders?

A natural question would arise of there was in fact division between the *supposed* leaders. But Paul makes the point first and foremost, that ***Christ*** is the centre, and the others (including himself) are merely servants (ministers) “...*through whom you believed...*” (1:3:5). As such, everyone had a part to play, and whilst sometimes different people might play the same part (teaching or baptising), in some cases different people played different parts. This was in fact the case in Corinth “...*I (Paul) planted, Apollos watered...*” Paul had been there at the beginning of the church in Corinth, and just as he outlined in the passage above, Apollos came along after and taught the brethren after Paul had left (Acts 19:1).

Most importantly in this discussion “...*but it is God who gives the increase...*” (1:3:6). Everyone else is just a servant of Jesus. We are tools that He uses to accomplish His will. We have the responsibility to teach and to make disciples (Mt 28:18-20). But we cannot be held accountable

for their obedience – that is a matter between them and God. Likewise as they grow as Christians, it is a matter of their heart – and how much it is tuned in to God.

So, when people grow as Christians, and when they obey the gospel, it is not because of what we have done (that we should be proud), but we should thank God, for He (and He alone) provides the nourishment.

The second example

Paul elaborates on the issue, which shows (again) the importance that he places on the issue. He firstly points out (closing the previous example of him doing the planting, and Apollos doing the watering) that we are the field. It is us who produce the growth.

The next example that he gives us is that of a building. And like the field, we are the product of what others have done (1:3:9). Others have worked to build and erect the building, and as such they have been the servants of God. Like the building, we did not get to be where we are by the actions of only one person. Several men have worked together to build the building, and this could not possibly happen without cooperation. The type of division and faction that was happening in the Corinthian church would not have resulted in the successful completion of a building.

Every building has a foundation. It supports the structure that is placed upon it and enables it to withstand the battering from winds and storms. Jesus is the foundation for our lives (1:3:11). Unless we build on Him as the foundation, then we will fail when we are tested with the storms of life.

But having the foundation is one thing, and having the right building on it is another. Using Paul's example, if we have a solid foundation that will withstand all of the storms and trials, but then build a house of straw, it will not prevail. Paul says the kind of things that we should not build our lives around are gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw. The first three are fairly obvious things that man might seek after. Many have died for gold, silver and precious stones, and many a robbery has been committed as men (and women!) seek to acquire them in an inappropriate way. As much as the first three items mentioned are regarded as something of value by man, the last three "...wood, hay, straw..." are at the opposite end. To follow Paul's building analogy, the first three were used to adorn the elaborate buildings and temples, whilst the last three were commonly used to construct the dwellings that the ordinary (and sometimes poor) man lives in.

Paul's argument isn't on the building, but rather on the builder. They buildings will all be tested with fire. The gold and silver will melt, the precious stones destroyed, and the wood, hay and straw houses burned up. What is important in our lives? Is it the gold or silver or jewellery that we have? Or the houses of wood (or any other material)? The thing that should be important is how we build our lives on the foundation of Christ!

The third example

Paul likens us to a temple. It is more than just a likeness or analogy like the previous examples he has used. The temple was the place where the gods dwelled, and the Temple in Jerusalem was where the Shekinah (God's presence – refer to Acts study 9) dwelt. But by this time the Shekinah had left the Temple – "...for the curtain of the Temple had been torn in two from top to bottom..." (Mk 15:38). Whilst the Temple and its rituals continued, "... the Holy Spirit thus signifying that the way into the holiest place of all was not available..." (Heb 9:8). Rather than the Shekinah presence of God, we now have God Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit, and He doesn't come and live in physical Temples, but He comes and lives in us "...you are the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you..." (1:3:16).

Like the earlier examples, we need to build on the right foundation – Jesus Christ, and we need to build a building (us = our lives) that are a suitable dwelling place for God Himself.

This example acts as a bridge towards the things that Paul will deal with a little later in the letter – of how we are to behave to bring honour to our bodies. If we defile our bodies, we are defiling the temple of God. This point would certainly not be lost on the Jews. They knew what it meant to defile the Temple. Within a few months of the time that he writes this letter, Paul will be back in Jerusalem and (almost) immediately arrested on the charge of having defiled the Temple by bringing Gentiles into it (Acts 21:28-29). The penalty was death, and the Jews were setting out to seize Paul and stone him (Acts 21:31). If the physical Temple was so sacrosanct, then how should we treat our bodies – the place where God now lives?

Where true wisdom lies

Paul now comes back to the main point (1:3:18-23), that of the divisions and contentions. The point that he has been making from the previous arguments is that *who* did the building isn't important. What *is* important is the foundation that we build on, and whether the building is a suitable dwelling for God to live within us. Seeking after wisdom is just foolishness (1:3:18-19).

“...Therefore let no one glory in men. For all things are yours ... and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's...” (1:3:21,23 NKJV)