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1 Corinthians

For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? 1 Corinthians 3:4

This is a fuller explanation of verse 3. He noted that there was "envy, strife, and divisions among" those at Corinth and then he reminded them of what he wrote in Chapter 1, verses 10-13. They were claiming allegiance to one person over another when the two proclaimed the same message. Some liked Apollos, maybe because he had better speaking skills. Some liked Paul, maybe because he was the first to bring the message to the lost in Corinth. Whatever the reason for their divisions, Paul says it is "carnal" thinking.

By placing a person in higher esteem than another when both are conducting the same service - a proclamation of the gospel, they were actually lowering their standards to that of the messenger rather than the message. Their allegiance was no longer to Christ, but on the one who was proclaiming Christ.

Has anything different arisen in the past 2000 years? No. And it has only increased with the advent of radio, TV, and now the internet. We long for flashy orators, great concerts of music set to lights and showmanship, and comfy side rooms where lattes are served. The vast majority of people don't come to church to worship the Lord and learn the word. Instead, they come to be allured by flash.

Life application: Let us remember what the purpose of church is. Above all, it is to worship the Creator and Redeemer of our souls. It is also intended for us to learn the word that He has given to us. And church is for fellowship and participation

with others in the worship and instruction. Those things which divert our attention from these only cause a return to the carnal side of who we are.

Who then is Paul, and who *is* Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? 1 Corinthians 3:5

There is the thought of individual subordination by Paul all over this verse. He begins with "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos...?" The word used for "who" is *ti*. It is an indefinite pronoun which means "who," "what," "which," or "why" based on the context. Though translated "who" by the NKJV, it is more likely "what" as many others so translate. It is a personal subordination that is intended as a deprecation of the ones being named.

He is referring again back to the first chapter of the letter where there were divisions based on individuals who carried the message of Christ. Some wanted to follow Paul, some Apollos, and some Cephas. But Paul prompts the Corinthians to think their allegiances through to their logical end. To help them along, he says that they are "but ministers."

In this, the word "ministers" is *diakonoi*. It is intended to convey the idea of "servants" rather than "lords" or "masters." Jesus uses the term in Mark 9:35 -

"And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.'" Mark 9:35

If Paul and Apollos (and any other person) is a servant, then they are ultimately responsible to a higher authority. In the case of a Christian, they are servants of the Lord Jesus. So how can someone rationally throw an unfounded allegiance behind the servant of the Lord? Within a military or political structure, there are many levels of responsibility, but there is ultimately a leader over all.

In the case of the United States government, there are hundreds and even thousands of levels within the government, but their authority ultimately rests in the three branches of government which derive their power from the people. And each person is under a higher authority. The choice for selecting leaders comes down to choices about what direction the nation should go and therefore, whether we logically think it through or not, moral choices are made in each election. As God is the ultimate moral Being, our political choices are actually choices for or against over-arching moral principles that we feel should go in one direction or another.

Therefore, even our political choices involve a sense of "servant hood." We don't always think this way, but this is what Paul is relaying to the Corinthians. And in turn, his letter is asking us to think the same way when elevating those in the ministry to positions which are actually unreasonable. And how many of us do this as we watch figures on TV or talk about the pastor that we follow in our home town!

Next Paul, when speaking of such ministers, uses the term "through whom you believed." If you have believed the message of Christ "through" someone, then they obviously aren't the source of the message. Rather, in the case of Paul and Apollos, they are servants of the Source for the transmission of the message. If they aren't the Source, then what sense does it make to elevate them to an exalted status? It is Christ who saves and it is the message of Christ that they convey.

Paul finishes this thought with the fact that they are ministers of the message "as the Lord gave to each one." It is the Lord who gave the authority; it is the Lord who is the Source of the message; and it is the Lord that the message proclaims. Nothing about Paul or Apollos is worthy of boasting or misdirected allegiance. It is the Lord in whom we boast, and it is the message of the Lord that we should hold fast to. The minister is but a servant. He has a duty to perform, he is to be recompensed for his duty (Galatians 6:6), and he can even be accorded "double honor" (1 Timothy 5:17), but he is not to be elevated in an unhealthy way.

Life application: Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. 1 Corinthians 3:6

Paul, like many of the writers, and of hundreds of instances in the Bible, uses an agricultural theme to present a spiritual truth. He has been discussing the division of the church based on individual preferences of one person over another. Some were following Paul, some Apollos, etc. However, Paul has already asked, "Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:13).

Such divisions are illogical because only Christ accomplished the work necessary to found the church. All the others did was help to relay the message. In his agricultural example, Paul begins with "I planted." To this day, the term "planting a church" is used to indicate the starting of a new church in an area. When a farmer or a forester plants a seed, they are using something that already exists, whose original Creator was God -

"Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb *that* yields seed, *and* the fruit tree *that* yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed *is* in itself, on the earth'; and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass, the herb *that* yields seed according to its kind, and the tree *that* yields fruit, whose seed *is* in itself according to its kind. And God saw that *it was* good. So the evening and the morning were the third day." Genesis 1:11-13

Like those agricultural things, God, through Jesus Christ, began the work of the church. Jesus alludes to this in John 12 -

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain." John 12:24

Paul merely planted what Christ had originated, having gone to Corinth to tell the good news of the gospel. There he planted a church. Eventually, Apollos came into the area and continued to build up the church. He, in essence watered the seed that Paul had planted. What Paul established, Apollos tended to and cared for. The plant was being cultivated; the church was growing.

However, despite their work, and despite the work of any other who had come to assist in the process, it was "God who gave the increase." God is the Creator of the tree with its seed. He is the Creator of the water. He is the One who continues to provide water. He is the One who sustains the life of the tree. God is the One to provide favorable conditions for growth - wind, temperature, etc. Every aspect of the tree is completely dependent on Him. And this includes having called Paul and Apollos and provided them with their abilities, the time they would live, the place they would live, etc. In the end it is all God's doing.

And this is seen all the more clearly in the tense of the verbs Paul uses. The first two, "planted" and "watered," are aorist indicative active verbs. They mark definite acts done at set times. However, the third verb, "gave the increase," is imperfect indicative active. It reveals a continued activity which certainly encompasses the work of Paul and Apollos.

God is always the agency behind the worker and He is the agency behind all aspects of the growth or decline of any church which belongs to Him. However, there is also the simultaneous activity conducted by the devil to thwart the work of those in the church. This is seen in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. As Jesus says in verse 19, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand *it*, then the wicked *one* comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside." Paul likewise speaks of the continued work of the devil in Ephesians 6:10-20.

Life application: To God alone be the glory for the church and all it does and continues to do.

So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. 1 Corinthians 3:7

Taking his thought from the preceding verse, Paul shows that though he "planted" and Apollos "watered" their efforts were but nothing. Instead, it is "God who gives the increase." This is a comparative verse where their accomplished works are put in relation to the continued unfolding of what God has accomplished, is accomplishing, and will accomplish through the plan He has so wisely ordained.

Paul is not saying that he (and thus we) shouldn't work. Nor is he saying that what we do isn't worth note in and of itself. We know this is so because in just another verse he is going to speak about rewards for the work we do, work which includes what he is speaking of now. But even this shows the supremacy of what God is doing. If we are rewarded by God, then it demonstrates that what we have done was a part of what God had ordained. In other words, the things we accomplish were set in His mind as a part of His unfolding plan.

And so, in a comparative sense, what we do is to be counted as nothing in relation to what His plan fully involves. From seed to mature tree, everything in the process which the foresters participated in and which was beneficial was a part of producing God's finished product; a product which started from the seed, nutrients, and water He originally created and which He continues to increase. Take to heart these words from Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 -

"Here is what I have seen: *It is* good and fitting *for one* to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it *is* his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this *is* the gift of God. For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps *him* busy with the joy of his heart."

Life application: All that we do and all that we accomplish is actually a gift of God. If it is a gift, then it came from Him and boasting is excluded. Likewise, praise for

the work of another is to be acknowledged as ultimately from the Lord. By keeping these things in perspective, then we will rightly direct all praise, boasting, and adoration to the ultimate Source of what is done.

Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. 1 Corinthians 3:8

In the preceding verse, Paul said "neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters..." As noted, this was not intended to mean that those who plant and those who water shouldn't work at all, as if their work was futile, but rather their duties are pale in comparison to the supreme and overarching work of God. What the laborers do is to use what God provides so that both "he who plants and he who waters are one." They complement each other rather than compete against one another. Therefore, to divide allegiance in the church between Paul or Apollos is misunderstanding their ultimate purpose.

They are cohesively working for the same end goal. Not only that, but one is merely building upon the other and therefore they are both filling necessary roles - not independent, but interdependent. And as noted, the tense of the verbs in verse 6 showed that they are a part of God's overall work. Dividing loyalties as the Corinthians were doing accomplished nothing except to mar a process that is being worked, from beginning to end, by God.

A question could arise then, if these divisions are marring a process in which Paul and Apollos are engaged in, and that process is being directed by God, are the Corinthians thwarting the plan of God? The answer must be, "No." God knows in advance all things. Therefore, the divisions had and have sound purposes. A few to be considered are -

- 1) The divisions in Corinth led to Paul's letter, a part of the Bible. As it is a part of Scripture used by all who read and apply their Bible - personally and within a church, then God's purposes were met through this schism. God provided the increase.

- 2) The division at Corinth, and many divisions since, have been used to turn one church into two (or more) and thus the gospel can spread more quickly. God provides the increase.
- 3) Such divisions may cause a church to expel those who are unsound, thus protecting the integrity of the church and causing improved spiritual growth. God provides the increase.
- 4) Etc.

These and many other problems which may seem to thwart God's work, never can. In the end, the united efforts of Paul and Apollos, the supposed divisions by the Corinthians, and the continued process of spreading the gospel - both by competent people and even incompetent people has and will result in God's plan being brought to a successful completion.

And once this wondrous church is taken home to glory, all members of it will "appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). At that time "each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor."

Paul will receive his reward for what he did, Apollos will receive his reward for what he accomplished, and you and me... we will stand before the Lord as well. So don't waste the time you have here, but instead whatever work your hands find to do for Him, do it with all your heart and soul. The rewards will be heavenly!

Life application: Good or bad, your actions are being used by God as He directs the building of His church. Make every effort to accomplish good and honorable results so that you will receive a good and blessed reward.

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, *you are* God's building.

1 Corinthians 3:9

In one verse, there are three clauses given by Paul in rapid succession. In each of them, "God" is emphatic. He begins with his continued use of agricultural themes found in the previous verses with "For we are God's fellow workers." Two possibilities come to mind:

- 1) We are synergistically working with God towards a common end; God does something and we cooperate with Him in producing the desired effect.
- 2) We aren't working with Him as a partner, but rather we (those below Him) are fellow workers with each other. He then is the Director of the operation and those who are involved in what He has directed are working together for that desired end.

Based on what he has said about himself and Apollos in the previous verses, the second option is certainly what is intended. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase because He is the Initiator, Planner, Sustainer, and Overseer of the process.

The second option is correct, but it could be looked at in one of two ways as well:

- 1) That God is conducting the labor through us at His will without our choices in the matter. It would be comparable to a farmer using a tool to do his work. The tool is directed solely at the farmer's will.
- 2) Our volitional choices are involved in the process.

The second option is certain. All we need to do is look at the conduct of those in Corinth, or at the conduct of any other Christian person. Peter, for example, was

the Apostle to the Jews and yet at times his actions were not in line with the gospel as Paul notes in Galatians 2:11-16.

If the first view were true, we would be limited to ascribing only the appropriate actions to God. However, Peter's failures (and those incorrect actions of the congregation in Corinth which necessitated this epistle) have been used by Paul as instruction in his letters which are now included in the Bible. As *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* notes - "He regards them as responsible beings, responsible to Him for the work they do. But the results are still God's and God's alone."

Continuing on in his tri-fold thought, Paul next says that "you are God's field." He retains his agricultural theme to indicate that the work being conducted by him and any other instructors is being worked out in a larger context, inclusive of all believers. And this context has continued on for 2000 years. The ministers of the gospel are laboring in a field to raise good crops; a crop which belongs to God. Having said this, he suddenly moves from agricultural to architectural... "you are God's building."

This is not happenstance or an attempt by Paul to simply make a fine sounding repetition, but it is an intentional change to substantiate the thoughts considered above concerning his first two statements. A building doesn't build itself. It requires an architect, materials, and a host of competent workmen who have a wide variety of skills.

In many other passages of the Bible, a builder, or the concept of building, is used in a moral sense. It indicates edification and exhortation in proper understanding and conduct. Therefore, like the parable of the sower and the seed which Jesus gives in Matthew 13:1-23, and the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24-30, we can know that God's building only includes those who were selected by Him beforehand and who were properly fitted into the structure. God knew in advance all the materials that would be needed for His building and He knew what would be discarded as worthless material in advance as well.

Interestingly, in His great building, the greatest Stone of all is the one that was rejected by those who are outside attempting to build their own structure; it is Jesus. As the Bible proclaims -

"The stone *which* the builders rejected
Has become the chief cornerstone.
This was the LORD's doing;
It *is* marvelous in our eyes." Psalm 118:22, 23

One final side note concerning this verse. The word for "field" is the Greek word *geōrgion*. It has been noted that the high use of the name "George" within Christianity is a result of Paul's use of this word here. If you know someone named George, you have now have something fun to share with him.

Life application: We are responsible to God for our actions and we will be held accountable to Him for the life we live. Work for heavenly rewards which never fade rather than earthly gain which perishes.

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. 1 Corinthians 3:10

In this verse, Paul begins with "According to the grace of God which was given to me..." Paul was, as he states himself several times in his writings, a soul needing God's grace and mercy. In 1 Timothy 1:12-14, he describes his former life this way -

"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting *me* into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus."

Despite his previous life, God bestowed His great grace on Paul, calling him as an apostle. But more than that, he called him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. The very thing which would have been most repugnant to him at one time, became the passion of his soul. In his calling, he became "a wise master builder." Here the Greek word is *architektōn*; an architect. He was given the responsibility to design the new structure of the gentile church by the wisdom God had ordained him with. His personal instruction, followed up by his letters are what provide that structure for churches even today.

In this solemn task, he "laid the foundation." There at Corinth (the body he is addressing), he proclaimed Jesus Christ. This is the one and only foundation of any true church. He describes this in detail elsewhere -

"Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." Ephesians 2:19-22

"The foundation of the apostles and prophets" is the word pronounced throughout the Bible which speaks of Jesus Christ. The entire body of Scripture testifies to Him. Therefore, the foundation Paul laid in Corinth is that foundation he writes about to them now (as will be seen in the next verse).

He laid that foundation, "and another builds on it." This is referring back to what he stated earlier, that he planted and Apollos watered. Each had his own role and neither is to be exalted above the other. All are working toward the same goal which is a mature church founded on, and which proclaims Jesus Christ. Because of this, care was and is required. Any departure from this truth can only lead to eventual apostasy. And so he warns them with the words, "But let each one take heed how he builds on it."

Throughout the history of the church, people have crept in with personal agendas, unbiblical teachings and traditions, and the mixing-in of false worship. As churches are so influenced, they degrade to the point where very little is left of true worship and pursuit of Christ. When this occurs, people either stagnate and fail to grow, or the congregation simply dies off as a Christian entity (see Revelation 2:5). Those who love Jesus Christ and His word will move to start a new church body which returns to the foundation which Paul speaks of here, Jesus Christ.

Life application: Without adherence to the Bible, and a sound interpretation of it, churches will very quickly fall away from the truth. "Jesus Christ" may be on their lips, but He is far from their hearts. Be attentive to the word of God and be ready to defend it.

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 3:11

In verse 10, Paul said "I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it." As a wise master-builder, he began the church at Corinth with a solid foundation; the solid foundation. Had he come as a philosopher with the wisdom of the Greeks or as a Jewish rabbi with the traditions of the Pharisees in order to build the church, there would be nothing truly solid for others to build on. But he came with the one Foundation that all of Scripture points to, Jesus.

"For" refers directly to the preceding verse which said, "let each one take heed how he builds on it." If Paul laid the foundation and others came with conflicting instruction, there would be no cohesion in the building. If one is to build a solid foundation and put up a house of reeds, the house will simply blow off the solid rock. He has wisely laid the foundation on what all of Scripture points to. Isaiah 28:16 shows us a hint of what was coming -

"Therefore thus says the Lord GOD:

'Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation,
A tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation;
Whoever believes will not act hastily.'"

This idea is cited at least five times in the New Testament and it is speaking of Jesus Christ. He is the cornerstone which is the foundation of the work of God. From this, there must be a harmonious erection of the rest of the building using the same material. This then speaks of the principle doctrines of the faith - the Trinity (which implies the Deity of Christ), the virgin birth, the incarnation, the all-sufficient atoning death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the surety of His coming again, etc.

If these principle doctrines are denied or skewed, they cannot be a part of the house which God is building. Nothing else can be added as well. It is heretical to teach a "sinless" state in Mary for example. We can have no other Mediator between us and God. And so on. It is all Christ, only Christ, and the properly-proclaimed Christ which must be the building materials upon the foundation, which is Christ.

Life application: Be careful to always return to the core teachings of Christ, never adding to, subtracting from, or twisting them as you go.