

Paul assigned primary importance to his building metaphor, and for good reason. From the point of creation the Scripture employs the sanctuary motif to express the notion of “sacred space” – not holy *place*, but how God is in relation to His creation. This is the fundamental issue in biblical revelation (so also in the notion of the kingdom of God) because it speaks to the heart of the divine intention that is revealed and played out in the Scripture as it unfolds the salvation history.

As it pertains to the present context, *sacred space is the very marrow of what Paul called God’s wisdom in Christ*, which, again, is the divine purpose for the creation bound up in Jesus Christ and now brought to light in the gospel. All of the preparatory salvation history spoke to this wisdom, but in a mystery. So it was in the first instance with the creation itself, and then more thoroughly in the various features of the Israelite kingdom. But at every level and stage of development, the wisdom of God had the concept of the divine sanctuary at its heart, whether *Eden* as the Garden of God (Genesis 2:8-15), *Canaan* as the divine habitation (Exodus 15:17) and then, more narrowly, *Jerusalem* and *Mount Zion* (cf. Deuteronomy 12:1-12 with 1 Chronicles 23:1-25; also Psalm 9:11, 76:1-2; Zechariah 2:1-5).

The wisdom of God speaks to the kingdom of God, which itself concerns the true and ultimate realization of sacred space. God’s presence in the midst of His people defined the Israelite kingdom (hence His departure signaled the kingdom’s dissolution), and so it would be with the everlasting kingdom which the Israelite theocracy merely prefigured (cf. Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-13, 51:1-6; Jeremiah 31:27-40, 33:1-26; Ezekiel 36:16-36; etc.). *The divine sanctuary stands as the essential and fundamental feature of the kingdom of God now realized in Jesus Christ, but no longer in terms of a place and a physical structure* (cf. John 1:14, 2:18-22, 4:1-24 and 14:1-4 with v. 23; also again 1 Peter 2:4-10 and Revelation 21:1-7).

- e. Paul understood these things and recognized their fulfillment in Christ and then, by extension, in the Church He is building. And for that very reason he discerned the significance and seriousness of the Corinthian factions.
- The Church is founded and built upon the one foundation that is Jesus Christ (3:11). God laid this foundation in the first instance (cf. Psalm 118:19-24; Isaiah 28:16; Mark 12:1-11; Acts 4:8-11), but He subsequently lays this same foundation in individual human hearts through the word of the gospel. Thus Paul could speak of laying the foundation of Christ – that is, union with and new life in Christ – as a wise master builder (3:10).
 - The foundation that is Christ Himself is laid in the case of each individual believer, but in order that they should become living stones in the living sanctuary that is Christ’s Church. In this sense, the Church itself as a corporate entity is constructed upon the foundation of Christ. *What this means is that all that transpires in the Church’s life stands upon and implicates that foundation*; the question then arises, do those things build on the foundation positively or negatively; do they build up or tear down?

In the case of the Corinthians and their various factions, each group doubtless believed they were properly building on the foundation of Christ by aligning themselves with the Lord's most worthy representative. What could be more positive and praiseworthy than the commitment to seriously appraise Christ's servants and bestow one's allegiance accordingly?

But what appears to the natural mind to be building with "gold, silver and precious stones" is actually building with "wood, hay, and straw." Building in this way is constructing *something* upon the foundation that is Christ, but what is erected is worthless and will not stand. Many in the Church err by attempting to overtly lay another foundation *alongside* Christ (3:11), but the more subtle and insidious form of this error is building wrongly upon the one true foundation. The implication is clear: The mere fact that Christ is the foundation of the Church's life and labors isn't enough; as the saints build upon it – *and every believer does indeed build upon it one way or another* – they must be careful how they build.

- f. Whatever a person may believe about his labors in the name of Christ, the true nature of the wisdom reflected and expressed in his work will finally be shown for what it is. God will judge it by bringing it into the light and testing it. Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds and her children (Matthew 11:16-19; Luke 7:31-35): So natural wisdom proceeds from the flesh and bears offspring for it, while divine wisdom flows from the mind of the Spirit and bears fruit for God. And once again, while the antithesis of *flesh* and *Spirit* speaks properly to the two possible realms of human existence (cf. John 3:1-8, 6:53-63 with Romans 7:1-6, 8:1-14; Galatians 6:7-8; Philippians 3:1ff), to the extent that men born of the Spirit yield to natural wisdom, they are yet "men of flesh" (ref. again 2:14-3:4; cf. Galatians 3:1-5, 5:16-26). Such are men who build with "wood, hay, and straw" – men whose works will not stand but will be consumed as dross in the day of judgment.

Two important doctrinal observations need to be made:

- 1) First, this passage is a classic Catholic proof-text for the dogma of *purgatory*. It is interpreted as affirming that all believers (or virtually all) must pass through a purging "fire" before they are fit to enter heaven's perfection. The reason is that Christians depart this world still marred by corruption and uncleanness. Purgatory is an unbiblical notion on many counts, and this passage in no way supports it. In the first place, purgatory pertains to a time of purging following God's judgment of the individual soul; Paul was speaking of the day of judgment itself. As well, the "fire" in this context serves to assay a man's works, not purge him of his sin.
- 2) The second thing to note is that Paul was here referring to judgment that is coming upon *Christians*, not unbelievers. Three things make this clear: The first is the larger context; second, this judgment is directed at evaluating what a man constructs upon the foundation of Christ; finally, those who pass through this judgment are *saved*, albeit at great loss (3:15).

Set alongside Paul's overall doctrine of salvation, this second observation might appear perplexing or even troubling. For everywhere in his writings Paul insisted that the Holy Spirit brings to perfection and fullness Jesus' life and likeness in those He indwells. In accordance with the Spirit's purpose and power, newness of life leads inexorably to consummation of life (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18 with 4:1-18; cf. also Romans 8:1-11, 31-39; Ephesians 1:1-23, 2:1-7; Philippians 1:1-6; etc.). Yet here Paul allows for the "perfection" that is final salvation, but one that is accompanied by immense loss and shame. Indeed, the sort of Christian Paul was referring to will be saved "by the skin of his teeth," having little or nothing to show for his life in the service of the Lord and His Church.

The difficulty and apparent inconsistency, however, are easily resolved when careful attention is given to Paul's statements and their context:

- 1) Of first importance is recognizing that Paul was speaking of the *Church* – the truth of what it is, what God has purposed for it, and the role men play in its growth and well-being. Paul wasn't addressing the issue of final judgment for individual Christians as such, but of the due recompense that awaits "builders" in Christ's Church. Like a construction worker whose pay is determined by the appropriateness, outcome, and quality of his labors as they contribute toward the completion of a building project, so it is with those who build into the Lord's temple.
- 2) For this reason, Paul's statements have nothing to do with the question of faith versus works in the matter of personal salvation. He wasn't speaking to the question of how an individual obtains his righteousness before God, but of the accountability of Christians in the performance of the work to which the Lord calls them as His servants. Here, the specific concern is the accountability of those who teach and lead in the Church. Of whom much is given much is required; so the authority and influence such men wield in God's name brings them under a greater accountability and judgment (cf. Jeremiah 8:8-12; 23:1-40; Ezekiel 34:1-10; Micah 3:9-12 with Matthew 23:1-36; Mark 6:34; John 10:1-10; James 3:1).
- 3) Though Paul's concern here was the Church's leadership, the principle of accountability he set forth applies to all Christians. Leaders are gifted by the Spirit for their work in the Church, *but so is every believer*. All are given gifts to be used for the good of the Body, and all will be brought to account for how they employed their endowments (2 Corinthians 5:10).

The Scripture's message – unfolded in the Old Testament and now brought to realization in Jesus Christ – is that men are justified and restored to fellowship with God as He satisfies the demand of their guilt and grants them to share in His life. Indeed, the nature of the problem precludes any role for human works. On the other hand, the nature of the *resolution* – new life in the power of the Spirit – establishes the believer's obligation (cf. Ephesians 2:1-10; 2 Timothy 1:1-2:26).

- g. Christ's Church – which included the fleshly and dysfunctional congregation at Corinth – is God's possession and project; it is His field and His building. Those metaphors have profound biblical significance and power, but most especially as they together point to the supreme truth of the Church, namely that it is God's holy habitation. *Unlike its two counterparts, this descriptor is no mere metaphor, but the literal truth.* The Church is literally and truly the dwelling of God in the Spirit. So Paul could confront and correct the Corinthians at the point of what they knew to be true but had lost sight of: They were *in fact* the temple of God precisely because the Spirit of God *literally* dwelled in them (3:16-17).

It is the divine presence that made the tabernacle and later the temple in actual fact what they represented physically. That is, the sanctuary wasn't holy because of the rare and consecrated materials from which it was constructed. Neither was it holy because of the holy ordinances that took place there, or even because of what the sanctuary symbolized. It was holy because the glory of God – Yahweh's manifest presence in His Shekinah – was there (Exodus 40:1-35; 1 Kings 8:1-11).

Over time (and for various reasons) Israel lost sight of this and came to regard the *truth* of the temple as residing in the temple building itself. Thus they concluded that Jerusalem could never fall because God had put His name there, signified by the physical sanctuary on Mount Zion. But what made the sanctuary *Yahweh's* sanctuary was His presence there as Israel's enthroned King (cf. Psalm 80:1, 99:1 with 1 Chronicles 29:23); once His glory had departed it was just another human structure in just another human city (cf. Ezekiel 10:1-8, 24:15-27).

Yahweh's departure from the sons of Israel meant their exile from Him, *whether or not they remained in the land of Canaan.* And because the essence of the Israelite kingdom was the covenant relationship between divine Father and human son (Exodus 3:1-10, 4:21-23, 6:1-8), Yahweh's sending away of His covenant son meant the end of the Israelite kingdom (cf. Isaiah 1:1-8; Hosea 1:1-2:13; etc.).

Yahweh departed from His sanctuary and soon after destroyed David's kingdom (Ezekiel 10:1-19, 24:1-21). Destruction, however, was not to be the last word; the Lord was going to restore David's house and throne, but the prophets were emphatic that neither physical return from exile nor the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple would end Israel's exile and reestablish David's kingdom. *Exile would end and restoration would come when Yahweh returned to His sanctuary.*

- Moreover, this theophany was to be realized in the person of the *Davidic Servant* (cf. Isaiah 40:1-11 with 42:1-13, 49:1-13, 59:1-21; cf. also Ezekiel 34:1-31 with 43:1-9; Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 6:9-15; Malachi 3:1ff).
- And most astonishing of all was the fact that this Servant, who in Himself would fulfill Yahweh's promise to return to His sanctuary, was also the One who was going to build that sanctuary, *and do so through the labors of men drawn from the ends of the earth.*

This was the glorious testimony of God's prophets, and Paul recognized precisely how these promises had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

- Jesus' coming restored Yahweh's glory to His temple – not a physical building constructed of stone and wood, but a true and living sanctuary constructed upon Himself as the cornerstone (John 1:14, 2:19-21, 4:1-24).
- He is the “head of the corner,” but also the builder of the sanctuary who builds upon Himself as Living Stone a superstructure composed of a multitude of living stones (cf. Mark 12:1-11; Acts 4:1-12; 1 Peter 2:4-6).
- And as Zechariah prophesied, Jesus Christ, the Branch of David, is building Yahweh's sanctuary in connection with the labors of men – men who build *into* God's sanctuary even as they themselves are built into it.

Paul grasped the wisdom of God in Christ; He recognized that, in Him, all the divine promises had attained their true meaning and realization. It was through that lens that he appraised the church at Corinth and the matter at hand. And so Paul's language wasn't mere metaphor chosen as an illustrating device; he was underscoring the christological, eschatological and spiritual nature of the Church and how the Lord orders and nurtures its life. The divisions at Corinth stood as an effective denial of Christ, the truth of His Church and how He builds it.

- Paul understood that the Church is the sanctuary of the triune God. For this reason, the Corinthian factions represented far more than sinful and unhealthy disagreement. So also their sin wasn't confined to jealousy, strife and disputations. The Corinthians doubtless viewed their contentions as evidence of their commitment to God and His truth, but in fact they were guilty of defiling His holy sanctuary (the Corinthian church). Left to continue their present course, they would eventually bring it to ruin.
- Most importantly, their factions amounted to *blasphemy* because they assigned an importance to men which belongs to God alone. Men have their role in God's purposes and accomplishment and will give an account for their labors (3:12-15). But the building of the Lord's sanctuary depends ultimately on His hand and not man's: He has laid the foundation that is Christ Himself, He insures the progress of building upon it, and He will place the capstone on the last day (cf. 3:7-11 with Zechariah 4:1-10).

Thus the Corinthian factions incurred a culpability and judgment beyond simply division itself. They were undermining the Lord's work toward the harvest and the completion of His temple. In terms of the latter symbolism, they were, on the one hand, building upon the foundation that is Christ with worthless materials (3:11-12); on the other, they were effectively tearing down (literally, *corrupting unto ruination*) the superstructure that was already in place (3:16-17). Both incur the severest judgment commensurate with the gravity of the violation.

- Those who build with worthless materials (Paul’s list of six construction materials highlights value, suitability and durability), will find their labor and its fruit completely consumed on the day when all things are judged. Just as a building constructed entirely of wood, hay and straw will burn with nothing left but ash, so it will be with the specious spiritual edifices raised up by the natural-minded in the Church.
- But wood, hay, and straw are *improper* materials as much as they are worthless ones; builders who use them undermine the integrity of the whole structure. In terms of the Corinthian situation, the various factions clearly sought the benefit of Christ’s Church, not its defilement and loss. They believed they were contributing to the work of building the Lord’s temple, but their labors were actually working toward its ruination.

Here again the profound antithesis between the judgment of the natural mind and the mind led by the Spirit is powerfully evident. The Corinthians judged themselves eminently wise and therefore wise laborers in God’s enterprise. So also at least some of them judged Paul a fool in comparison to themselves – a man whose labors for Christ were insignificant at best (4:6ff; cf. 2 Corinthians 10:1ff). But Paul, the apparent fool, recognized by the mind of Christ that *he* was in fact the wise builder (ref. again 3:10) and that the seemingly wise Corinthian “builders” were actually tearing down God’s temple.

They may not have realized what they were doing, but the Lord did, and Paul wanted them to understand that He is exceedingly jealous for His sanctuary. If the physical, typological sanctuary was “holy to the Lord” such that any defilement or violation was punished swiftly and severely, how much more will Yahweh rise up against those who defile or seek to destroy His true, everlasting sanctuary.

Paul’s assertion ought to stand as a stark and fearful warning to those who would lead Christ’s Church. Though comprised of human beings, the Church is not human in the sense that it is not of man: *It is not human in its source, essence or nature, and therefore the application of human wisdom to it can only work toward its defilement, disfigurement, dysfunction and desolation.* The leadership at Corinth were guilty of this error, and the factions they engendered were bearing their expected fleshly fruit.

Cultural and other human factors framed the Corinthians’ notion of wisdom, and so it continues to this day. In every place and time, Christians are like a fish that doesn’t know it’s wet: Immersed in their own lives, culture and traditions, they’re unaware that those things deeply affect their thinking and judgment. Believing themselves adherents and promoters of God’s wisdom in Christ, Christians readily become proponents of the prevailing natural wisdom, whether it derives from the world around them or from the Church itself. Ecclesiastical tradition and accepted orthodoxy can be just as contrary to the wisdom of God and hostile to His Church as cultural trends and fads. The principle of “antichrist” – that which stands in the place of the truth as it is in Christ – always opposes God’s sanctuary regardless of whether it operates from within the Church or outside it.