

The Foundation of the Church

**The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation, by water and the Word;
From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride;
And for her life He died.**

The words of this popular hymn capture the message of Christ that Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 3-4.

The church is not about favorite preachers; Paul, Apollos, or Cephas, it is about Jesus Christ. Much less is this true in our day where some people almost worship some religious leader.

1. Divisions in the Church

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. ²I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able; ³for you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men? ⁴For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I *am* of Apollos," are you not carnal?

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

Paul addresses them as "brethren" and his "children" [3:1; 4:14-15] and so he considers them to be true believers in Christ but they are acting as though they were not Christians. They are acting like babes who are not ready for solid food.

The proof of this is the envy and strife caused by the divisions over preachers.

These preachers are only servants of Christ who brought the Gospel to you, writes Paul.

Paul is careful to define the role that he and Apollos had in the planting of the church at Corinth. "Who is Paul, and who is Apollos..."

We are mere men and servants at that.

We expect babes to act like babies but not grown people.

The goal of every Christian is to mature in the faith.

“Here one may ask if Paul presented a different Christ to different people. I answer that this refers to his manner or form of teaching, rather than the substance of what he taught. For the same Christ is milk for babes, and solid food for adults.” (Calvin)

Heb 5:12-14

¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. ¹⁴ But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

“We are not to preach of everything, to every man, at every time, in every place; but in prudence to dispense as Auditors are able to bear it; So did our Saviour.” (Burgess)

Mark 4:33-34

³³ And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear *it*. ³⁴ But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

³ for you are still carnal.

There is an important distinction between the two Greek words in verses 1 & 3.

In verse 1, Paul says that when they were but babes in Christ they were ‘fleshy’ SARKINOI. But in verse 3, he accuses them of ‘still having the nature and characteristics of ‘flesh’ i.e. they are ‘fleshly’ SARKIKOI. The difference between the two terms is: ‘fleshy,’ and you cannot help it, as with babes; ‘fleshly,’ and you can but do not help it. ‘Fleshy,’ you carry a bad load but will soon be rid of most of it; ‘fleshly,’ you follow a bad norm and refuse to get rid of it. Paul approves of neither condition but cannot especially blame them for the former whereas he must decidedly blame them for the latter. (Lenski)

Misunderstanding Paul’s meaning in verses 1-3 had produced a false teaching that is enjoyed by many deceived people. Paul is not saying that the Corinthian’s are still carnal; but that they are acting as though they were still carnal.

This error goes by the label “Carnal Christian.”

“Oh, he is a “carnal Christian” meaning that he is a Christian but continues to live like a lost person. Carnal means to be in the flesh (sinful nature). Paul writes in Romans 8:5-8 that this is an impossible condition. A person is either spiritual or carnal.

Rom 8:5-8

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. ⁷ Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. ⁸ So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁴ For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I *am* of Apollos," are you not carnal?

“Observe, That when the Devil cannot hurt the church by a profane and sinful Ministry, then he labours to destroy it by abusing the names and esteem of those who are truly holy and eminent... so the Devil when he cannot destroy souls by stirring up wicked instruments, he will endeavour that men think of good instruments more than they ought.” (Burgess) Cf. 1:12

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

“Ministers are mere instruments in the hands of God. The doctrines which they preach are not their own discoveries, and the power which renders their preaching successful is not in them. They are nothing; and therefore it is an entire perversion of their relation to the church to make them heads of parties.” (Hodge)

⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.

If you have ever planted anything you can easily see the metaphor that Paul uses. You can plant and you can water but you can't make anything grow.

Isa 55:10-11

¹⁰ "For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven,
And do not return there,
But water the earth,
And make it bring forth and bud,
That it may give seed to the sower
And bread to the eater,
¹¹ So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper *in the thing* for which I sent it.

Isa 61:11

For as the earth brings forth its bud,
As the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth,
So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the
nations.

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

Paul and Apollos are nothing and so you ought not to make them the occasion of divisions among you.

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

Paul and Apollos are not in competition so why do you cause trouble in the church by your choosing up sides as it were?

In the context of the woman at the well in John 4, Jesus had sent His disciples into the city to buy food; Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman and after she was saved she went into the village and told them about Jesus; a multitude of people followed her back to the well. Jesus told His disciples:

John 4:34-38

³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'There are still four months and *then* comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! ³⁶ And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. ³⁷ For in this the saying is true: 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors."

The lesson from Jesus and from Paul is that we can only sow the seed and water it but God must bless the effort and we may only be reaping where someone else has sown.

Don't worry too much about rewards; just be faithful and the rewards will be appropriate. Whatever they are they are over and above salvation, like the icing on the cake.

Without turning there, later see Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-28.

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, *you are* God's building.

The "we" are the ministers and the "you" are God's people. But all belong to God.

2. The Foundation of Faith

1 Corinthians 3:10-17

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

After verse 9 the metaphor changes from gardening to building construction. Paul planted seed in a field now is laying a foundation for a building.

Paul is a planter [6], a founder [10], and father [4:15].

Apollos watered the seed and now he builds on the foundation.

Apollos and the rest are waterers, after-builders, and teachers.

There is only one true foundation for the church and that is Jesus Christ. A “church” founded on any other basis than faith in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah is not a church but only a social gathering.

The church is the eternal purpose of God and there is nothing to follow the church after the end of this present age.

Eph 3:8-12

⁸To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; ¹⁰ to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly *places*, ¹¹ according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.

¹² Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Even if the foundation is sure the building's superstructure may not be strong.

“Gold, silver, precious stones,” were used in the construction of ancient temples.

“Wood, hay, straw,” were used for ordinary homes. Hay [mixed with mud] was used for the walls, and straw for the roofs, supported by a wooden frame.

For a time the buildings made out of wood, hay, and straw may seem to last. But in “the Day,” the return of Christ, the works will be tested and judged.

We are saved by grace through faith alone; but we will be judged by our works.

A believer will not lose his salvation but the lasting value of his works will be tested. Whatever is of value will remain and the rest will be burned up.

Rev 14:13

Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: 'Blessed *are* the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'"

"Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them."

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which *temple* you are.

Paul is writing to the church at Corinth and the four “you’s” are plural and refer to the church as a whole rather than to individual believers. Later in Chapter 6, it will be individuals but here it is the local church.

The church at Corinth has been founded on Christ; the right foundation. The Holy Spirit manifested God’s presence in the same manner He was in the temple before the coming of Messiah.

Take care that you do not defile the temple of God [the church] through divisions or other strife. God will judge anyone who destroys His temple. It may be severe chastisement for believers who cause schism or it may be eternal punishment for unbelievers who seek to destroy the church.

3. Wisdom and Foolishness

1 Corinthians 3:18-23

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "*He catches the wise in their own craftiness*"; ²⁰ and again, "*The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.*" ²¹ Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come – all are yours. ²³ And you *are* Christ's, and Christ *is* God's.

Paul refers back to the Corinthian believer’s fascination with Greek “wisdom.” A man must become a fool in the opinion of the world in order to be truly wise. Human wisdom is foolishness with God.

Paul quotes Job 5:13 in verse 19; and Psalm 94:11 in verse 20.

Don’t boast in men; all things are yours because you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.

We are just servants, says Paul of himself and Apollos. Jesus Christ is the only foundation for a true church. Now, what does it mean to be a servant of Christ?

Paul uses two terms, "servants" and "stewards." The term "servants" refers to a rower on the lowest level of a galley ship, who always had someone above him to tell him what to do. The term "stewards" refers to a manager of an estate who was entrusted with all of the property.

The chief qualification of a steward is that they are trustworthy [faithful].

Jesus taught this and Paul writes that this is what really matters.

Luke 12:35-48

³⁵ "Let your waist be girded and *your* lamps burning; ³⁶ and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. ³⁷ Blessed *are* those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down *to eat*, and will come and serve them. ³⁸ And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find *them* so, blessed are those servants. ³⁹ But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. ⁴⁰ Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

⁴¹ Then Peter said to Him, "Lord, do You speak this parable *only* to us, or to all *people*?"

⁴² And the Lord said, "Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom *his* master will make ruler over his household, to give *them their* portion of food in due season? ⁴³ Blessed *is* that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁴ Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. ⁴⁵ But if that servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, ⁴⁶ the

master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for *him*, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint *him* his portion with the unbelievers. ⁴⁷ And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare *himself* or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*. ⁴⁸ But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

Without going into it this is also the example of Joseph as he managed Pharaoh's kingdom in Egypt. [Genesis 39]

Then Paul says that his primary concern is not how he is judged by other men, or even his own conscience. The Judge that matters is the Lord Jesus Christ.

That does not mean that our reputation is not important. Cf. 2 Cor 8:21.
Neither does he mean that his conscience doesn't matter. Cf. 2 Cor 1:12; 2 Tim 1:3

What Paul means is that human judgment is often wrong and that the Lord will judge him fairly. So you Corinthians must not pass judgment on my ministry [4:5].

5. The Folly of Boasting

1 Corinthians 4:6-13

⁶ Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. ⁷ For who makes you differ *from another*? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive *it*, why do you boast as if you had not received *it*?

Paul says that he used himself and Apollos as an example of not taking sides based on personalities. If you do that you "go beyond what is written."

Without a specific quote, Paul is giving the tenor of the OT teaching about a servant and his master.

What Paul writes in verse 7 should remind the Corinthians and us not to boast about any gift that God has given. There no place for personal glory in serving the Lord as a servant and a steward.

⁸ You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us – and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! ⁹ For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. ¹⁰ We *are* fools for Christ's sake, but you *are* wise in Christ! We *are* weak, but you *are* strong! You *are* distinguished, but we *are* dishonored!

Verses 8-10 are a series of statements designed to bring them to their senses. Paul uses irony; they thought themselves rich as kings; are they better than the apostles? The apostles are, as it were, on display as condemned men. Condemned men were displayed in the arena before they turned the lions loose.

¹¹ To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. ¹² And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; ¹³ being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.

Some of the hardships of Paul and his associates are physical [11], and continue to the present hour. They lacked support and were cursed [12]. They answered these abuses with kindness [13]. The result was that they are thought to be the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

Paul is not whining and complaining, he is simply stating what you can expect if you are faithful to Jesus Christ.

John 15:18-20

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before *it hated* you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

¹⁴ I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. ¹⁵ For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. ¹⁶ Therefore I urge you, imitate me. ¹⁷ For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.

Paul has been very direct and even harsh in his tone; and now he speaks as a loving father to his children. As any good father would do Paul has admonished the Corinthians for their own benefit.

To show just how concerned Paul is for the Corinthians he is sending his trusted co-worker, his son in the Lord, to help them work out what Paul has taught them. It will be as though Paul himself were present.

¹⁸ Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. ²¹ What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?

Apparently Paul knew that some, probably the most partisan, would accuse him of being afraid to come himself. He assures them that he will come soon enough and will not be afraid to confront the ones causing the trouble.

They have the choice; severity or gentleness?

Before he comes to Corinth he will deal with some moral issues in the church.