

THE CHURCH, GOD'S BUILDING (1 Cor 3.9-17) CBC-27 Aug 2023 AM

A church's unity glorifies God and prospers His people. Satan tries to divide and conquer us. Disunity is Paul's first pastoral concern in 1 Cor. (1.10). Unity is a recurring theme and a theme in our sermon text. Paul strengthens our grasp and hold upon spiritual unity by using the metaphor of the church as a building, specifically, as the Lord's Temple.

Knowing the church is God's building strengthens our spiritual unity.

Paul's words emphasize three key elements of unity: 1) the church's builders (one team), 2) its building materials (one quality), and 3) its identity as God's Temple (one holiness).

I. The Unity of Ministers as Builders (9, 10a), a team of builders
Divisions in Corinth developed over favorite preachers (1.12), as if they were competitors, but actually, true gospel ministers are just cooperative workers on the same project—building the church of Jesus Christ.

Using a different metaphor of the church as a fruitful field, Paul stresses this (5-9). Gospel ministers are only *instruments* of your faith, not authors or objects of it (5). We are only *agents* of spiritual increase, not the givers of it (6), and God could do it without us (7). We are one workforce in our field labors (planting, watering), though each will have his own reward (8).

In verse 9, Paul changes the metaphor from husbandry (farming) to construction. Two things are the same: 1) the church belongs to God, 2) the ministers are cooperative workers. These two truths promote unity.

“Building” means “a building as a result of a construction process” (BDAG). Specifically, “God’s building” (9), “construction” (alt.), that which God is making. Not just an individual Christian is God’s work, but here, esp. believers-as-conjoined are His work. We are “living stones” (1 Pet 2.5) fitly framed together. “Ye [2PP] are God’s building.” And as “God’s building,” we are His “temple” (6), “holy” (17), not ordinary construction like our private homes, but esp. belonging to Him. Cf. closely Eph 2.19-22.

“Masterbuilder” (10a), “the superintendent in the erection of buildings” (BDAG). Not “architect” if it includes design. Ministers must follow God’s design. Scripture is our blueprint. Superintendents are apostles (e.g., Paul) and ordinary gospel ministers (e.g., Apollos), “according to the grace of God.” Other church members are not the planters/waterers/builders here but the product: the harvest or building (note “we/ye” in 9). Biblical ecclesiology is not strictly egalitarian but sets forth ministerial authority.

→ Knowing all true ministers are on the same team of builders unifies us.

II. The Unity of Materials for Building (10b-15), foundation + superstructure
“Jesus Christ” is the “foundation” (lit., “the supporting base for a structure;” fig., “the basis for something taking place or coming into being, of the elementary beginnings of a thing,” BDAG). He is “the cornerstone,” i.e., 1) His Person Himself part of, and the first member of this church and 2) the message about Him (gospel doctrine) is foundational to the church also. By preaching this sinners are saved and believers are edified, stirred to true Christian worship (“I have laid the foundation” must esp. refer to

gospel doctrine). No church at all without the true Christ and the true gospel as its foundation. The true church is apostolic, with this foundation. Superstructure, “another builds on” the foundation. Paul warns about “how” (10). The right way is with worthy, precious materials (required for a temple); the wrong, with unworthy, cheap materials (a common shelter). This at least refers to the teaching. Without leaving the gospel behind, we must also teach “all the counsel of God” (Acts 20.27). We must “go on to maturity” in teaching more than the basic Christian message (Heb 6.1-3). We must evangelize and disciple (Matt 18.19, 20). The contrast is between scriptural teaching and any “other doctrine,” true or false. The pulpit is not for heresies or trivialities, but for “godly edifying which is in faith” aiming for “love out of a pure heart” (1 Tim 1.3-5). Pulpits today add so much sawdust in the grain, as farmers sometimes foolishly do with their horses.

“It is not made clear whether Paul’s metaphor refers to the persons as in God’s building in verse 9 or to the character of the teaching as in verse 13. Probably both ideas are involved” (A. T. Robertson). At least by inference, we say the right way of building the church is also with believers only (precious) as members, not unbelievers (common). The paedobaptist practice (believers & their children as church members) fails this standard! “Wood, hay, and stubble” teachings and people may raise up a large structure quickly but it will prove to be unsound in the end, when Judgment Day comes. Christ will expose and condemn common doctrines and persons, as fire consumes common materials and leaves the precious.

Where ministers are building upon the right foundation with the right doctrines and people, they will receive a reward (14). Yet if they err somewhat in the superstructure, they may still be saved, while their off-the-mark teaching and false converts will perish (15). “This may help to enlarge our charity. We should not reprobate men for their weakness: for nothing will damn men but wickedness” (Matthew Henry).

→ Building a church with biblical doctrine and saved members unifies us.

III. The Unity of the Sanctity of the Building (16, 17)

Paul’s rhetorical question implies they should know. The church is the believing congregation, indwelt by the Spirit, and so rendered holy. And if the church is holy, defiling it has severe consequences. It might be “defiled, either by imbibing false doctrine, or being tempted to any [moral] looseness of life. Now, (saith the apostle,) if any one goeth about to do this, which all preachers do who teach any false doctrine, or any principles that lead to a liberty for the flesh, or lead to an ill and scandalous life, God shall destroy those men. . . . [There is] exceeding great peril and hazard to them that endeavor and attempt any such thing” (Matthew Poole).

→ Recognizing the church’s sanctity and the severe danger of defiling it will promote our spiritual unity in truth and piety.

Beloved, regard me as a gospel minister among many others and as over you in the Lord. Please support me in fidelity to the scriptural blueprint while building the church. Be patient and appreciative of hearing only precious doctrine and adding only credible believers to our membership. Let us tremble together lest we defile the church in any way. These commitments will preserve and deepen our spiritual unity in Christ. Ω