



1 Corinthians - Chapter Three

II 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21 - Divisions over Christian Preachers (continues)

II.b 1 Corinthians 1:18-4:21 - God's wisdom answers the problem (continues)

Summary of Chapter Three

In this chapter Paul accuses the Corinthians of their worldliness and divisions. He reminds them of their responsibilities to build upon the single foundation that Paul had first laid for them, which was the Gospel of Christ.

Paul reminds them that they and their teachers are merely human. He encourages them to give due honour to their bodies by keeping them pure, and to humility and self-diffidence. He then warns them against glorying in particular leaders and teachers because they were teaching a unified message. All who profess the faith belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to God.

II.b.ii 1 Corinthians 3:1-4:21 - God's wisdom applied to Apollos, Paul, and the Corinthians

Paul now shows the Corinthians how God's choice to work through weakness for his own glory applies to their divided church. Just as Paul and Apollos work together for the advancement of the Gospel, so the Corinthians should stop boasting about their favourite Christian leader and build a united church.

II.b.ii.1 1 Corinthians 3:1-22 - On Divisions in the Corinthian Church

The Corinthians were guided by a culture that was based on social status and they aspired to be reckoned among those of influence. Therefore, they argued amongst themselves about which leader they should follow. Paul, clearly disappointed in what he has heard about the Corinthians behaviour, argues that all of the apostles were building on the single foundation that had been established through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was by their work in building the church that they would be judged by God and not by the people of Corinth.

¹ And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?

1 Corinthians 3:1-3

I could not speak to you as spiritual people. Paul continues the theme of the Corinthians perceived spirituality, something they clearly had believed themselves to be, yet they were delusional about, which Paul will bring to a head in v.4. Paul was more or less saying that they were 'living on the basis of their created and corruptible nature alone'.

Of the flesh. The first instance of this phrase in v.1 represents a Greek word *sarkinos* that means 'characterised by the flesh': <<***For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin***>> (Romans 7:14). The second instance in v.3 represents a slightly different word *sarkikos* that means 'made of flesh' or 'fleshly', i.e. human: <<***Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time?***>> (2 Corinthians 1:17). Paul uses both terms here in the same way to express his disappointment in the Corinthians' behaviour.

Flesh takes different meanings in Scripture, but in Paul's letters it often refers to 'unredeemed human nature' with all of its desires and characteristic behaviour. Although the Corinthians are Christians indwelt by the Spirit, their divisive behaviour shows that they are acting like the unbelieving world around them.

Infants in Christ. Although the Corinthians boasted about their own wisdom and believed they were superior to many because of the knowledge they thought they possessed, Paul points out that they are a long way from maturity in terms of both knowledge and their relationship with Jesus: <<***For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil***>> (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Not ready. Paul thinks it is unhelpful and dangerous to give advanced teaching to Christians who were morally and spiritually immature and proud. Even those close to Jesus were not taught everything he had wanted them to know, for they too were not ready: <<***I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now***>> (John 16:12).

Other teachers had come after Paul, perhaps including Peter and Apollos, and they had perhaps spoken of things that were more exciting than the basics that Paul had taught them. However, Paul had been among them for 18 months and knew their fallibility all too well. Therefore, he had kept his teaching at a much

more basic level, clearly attempting to ground them in their faith before moving on to the deeper theological issues that he speaks of so eloquently in his other letters.

There is jealousy and quarrelling among you. This is an issue that has plagued the worldwide church and is part of the reason why there are so many denominations rather than a single, united church of Jesus Christ.

Behaving according to human inclinations. Paul has gone beyond stating that they were showing little sign of living according to the Spirit; they were actually actively engaged in resisting His work in their lives.

⁴ For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul’, and another, ‘I belong to Apollos’, are you not merely human?

1 Corinthians 3:4

I belong to Apollos. Paul reminds them of the ongoing argument that commenced at the opening of the letter: <<*What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’, or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Cephas’, or ‘I belong to Christ’>> (1 Corinthians 1:12). This human failing highlighted a fundamental weakness in their understanding of the Gospel and their relationship with God.*

Are you not merely human? The Corinthians had become conceited with a mixture of the Gospel they had received and the human wisdom taught by the philosophers of the day. Here, Paul brings them back to reality by indicating they are not demonstrating the lives of those who are filled with God’s Spirit but are living according to the ways of the world.

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

1 Corinthians 3:5-7

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Paul is not interested in setting himself up in competition with Apollos. What he is interested in is combating those who might wish to establish such a contest for it is as bad as the false teaching that Paul writes so vehemently against to the Galatians. Neither he, Apollos nor anyone else should be set up on a pedestal. The only one that is needed is the Cross, and Jesus who hung and died on it, passing judgment on all human fame, celebrity, popularity and reputation.

The Lord assigned to each. True leaders of the church are chosen by God and allocated the spiritual gifts in order to carry out his will for their lives: <<*And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?>> (1 Corinthians 12:28-30), and: <<*The gifts he gave**

were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ>> (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Servants through whom you came to believe. Paul makes the point that neither he, Apollos, nor any other teacher, pastor or evangelist is anything other than a servant of God and his church. They are not there to be revered above the message they bring. However, they should not be seen in the sense of slaves, where the owners may have shown them little or no respect! Paul will shortly continue with this theme: <<*Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries*>> (1 Corinthians 4:1).

⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. ⁹ For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

1 Corinthians 3:8-9

Receive wages according to the labour. God's blessing and reward in the lives of Christians varies according to their faithfulness to the tasks he entrusts to them. Those who work for the church deserve their reward: <<*Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house*>> (Luke 10:7), and: <<*Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due*>> (Romans 4:4). Refer also to the comments made on vv.14-15.

The word for servant here is the same as would be used for one who would wait on tables. Paul is indicating that they were simply serving the food that God had prepared and cooked for his people. It does not matter which waiter brings the food to the table. What matters is that God is in charge in the kitchen.

Working together is a key part of the ministry to which each person is called. Certainly Paul viewed those with him as his co-workers: <<*As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain*>> (2 Corinthians 6:1 NIV), <<*and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith*>> (1 Thessalonians 3:2).

You are God's field, God's building. People belong to God and not to those who are working on his behalf. The image of the produce of a field is one where a crop is being grown towards maturity with a specific purpose in mind. Similarly, a building is constructed for a purpose. It is not just intended to stand empty and look good, nor be neglected until it falls down.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.

1 Corinthians 3:10

I laid a foundation. Paul had spent his whole life serving God. Initially, this was as a Pharisaic Jew and then as a follower of Jesus. He had been equipped by God for the work he was to perform as an apostle to the Gentiles and was therefore equivalent to **a skilled master builder.** Paul preferred to lay the foundation for a new church: <<*Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation*>> (Romans 15:20), yet he acknowledges such a foundation was also laid by others: <<*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone*>> (Ephesians 2:19-20).

Someone else is building on it. Paul acknowledges the work that others are now doing in the church, whether it refers to an apostle like Peter or a local gifted teacher does not matter. What he does expect though is that such people are authentically called to the ministry they are undertaking and are prepared to be diligent in their work, i.e. they **must choose with care how to build on it.** This is another message that is relevant to people who choose to lead churches in any age. They need to be called to the task and not to take on the role just because they want its authority or status.

As Paul will go on to indicate in vv.16-17, the type of building that should be under construction is a place of worship, for that was the original design intention for all human beings. Ultimately, what every church worker should be asking themselves is whether the work they are doing is encouraging and equipping people for worship in holiness and truth. If not, are they perhaps being untrue to the foundation that has been laid?

¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:11

Paul had founded the church in Corinth and others had come along to develop it. However, it was not Paul's church or anyone else's because **the foundation is Jesus Christ.** Paul was not the founder of Christianity, just one of many who went around teaching essentially the same Gospel message to anyone who would listen: <<*Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe*>> (1 Corinthians 15:11).

¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — ¹³ the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

1 Corinthians 3:12-13

Gold, silver, precious stones were among the materials used in the construction of Solomon's temple: <<*So I have provided for the house of my God, so far as I*>>
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised 1Corinthians3-5

was able, the gold for the things of gold, the silver for the things of silver, and the bronze for the things of bronze, the iron for the things of iron, and wood for the things of wood, besides great quantities of onyx and stones for setting, antimony, coloured stones, all sorts of precious stones, and marble in abundance>> (1 Chronicles 29:2), and here an image for what will survive the judgment, in contrast to hay, and straw.

Although Paul does not explicitly refer to the Jerusalem temple until vv.16-17, his inference here is clear. Some may have found it strange that he should refer to such a magnificent building, a wonder of the ancient world, and relate it to people. Paul was not the first to do this, as the Dead Sea Scrolls refer to the people of their community as the temple of God. Traditionally, these people were thought to be the Essenes; however, this has been challenged and some favour the priestly Zadokites or another unknown Jewish group. The term church is generally accepted in the bible to refer to a body of believers, although it is often used to describe a building or even an establishment.

Work that Christians do in Christ-like faith and obedience (vv.10-11), will survive and be rewarded; work done in the power of the 'flesh' (v.1), or in disobedience to Scripture will not: *<<I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, 'Nothing beyond what is written', so that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another>>* (1 Corinthians 4:6).

For the Day will disclose it is a clear reference to the Day of Judgement when Jesus will return as judge of mankind: *<<For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marvelled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed>>* (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

Although the reference to the fire will test what sort of work each has done is seen by some to fit the notion of Purgatory, something that was brought into church teaching during the middle ages, and which is still taught by some today, this passage is more about the validity of the work done by those within the church and how they have either built up the church, i.e. thus the reference to using gold, silver, precious stones, or their failure to do so, using the analogy of readily combustible materials, that is, wood, hay, straw.

¹⁴ If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

1 Corinthians 3:14-15

Reward, loss, saved, as through fire. Refer back to v.8 and to: *<<I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who*
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised 1Corinthians3-6

judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God>> (1 Corinthians 4:4-5). Although those who have believed in Jesus have already been justified by faith: *<<Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ>>* (Romans 5:1), and will not face condemnation on the final day: *<<Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life>>* (John 5:24), *<<There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus>>* (Romans 8:1), and: *<<Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies>>* (Romans 8:33), God will still judge their works: *<<Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God>>* (Romans 14:10-12), and: *<<For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil>>* (2 Corinthians 5:10), rewarding them accordingly: *<<'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you>>* (Matthew 6:1-6), and: *<<Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward>>* (Matthew 10:41-42). Paul's point applies not just to church leaders but to anyone who contributes in any way to building up the church: *<<To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good>>* (1 Corinthians 12:7), and: *<<So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church>>* (1 Corinthians 14:12). Further details can be found in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and the comments made there.

The builder will be saved is a clear indication that, although there may be some loss of reward for those who do not persevere or achieve God's will for their own lives, they will not lose their salvation. Judgement itself is clear cut between those who have accepted the Gospel and those who have not: *<<But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgement will be revealed. For he will repay*

according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality>> (Romans 2:5-11). The Lord's brother calls on believers to save doubters from the fire: <<And have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies>> (Jude 22-23), which has similar intent to that written about by the prophet: <<I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a brand snatched from the fire; yet you did not return to me, says the Lord>> (Amos 4:11), although the outcome will hopefully be different.

This is further explained through the term but only as through fire. This is not an image of hell but a refining fire, where human death and then the Second Coming perform the final cleansing from residual sin. This was an image portrayed by the prophets: <<And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The Lord is our God'>> (Zechariah 13:9), and: <<But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap>> (Malachi 3:2).

Tom Wright comments: The main point, of course, is the seriousness with which Paul takes the various tasks and responsibilities of Christians, particularly leaders and teachers in the church. We are not playing games. There are serious and lasting issues at stake. It is possible to build wisely, well, and with the right materials. It is also possible to build badly, or with the wrong materials. It is possible actually to pull down the building altogether. God takes these possibilities very seriously. Do we?

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

1 Corinthians 3:16

God's dwelling place on earth was originally the tabernacle that was transported around the wilderness and into the Promised Land. It was later replaced when King Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem.

The making of a dwelling place in the tabernacle anticipated Solomon's temple, refer to 1 Kings Chapter 6, and prefigured God's dwelling with humanity in Christ: <<'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us'>> (Matthew 1:23), <<Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body>> (John 2:19-21), and: <<I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb>> (Revelation 21:22); in the church:
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised 1Corinthians3-8

<<So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God>> (Ephesians 2:19-22); in the individual Christian: <<Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?>> (1 Corinthians 6:19); and at the consummation: <<And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them>> (Revelation 21:3). The actual construction of the tabernacle is described in Exodus chapters 36-39.

God's Spirit dwells in you? God's glory, the *Shechinah*, dwelt within the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle and later the temple. Through the giving of the Holy Spirit, God now dwells within those who have turned to him through his Son.

¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

1 Corinthians 3:17

If anyone destroys God's temple. The foregoing verses may have indicated that the builders may have been using inappropriate materials to make this new temple of God; the truly spiritual person. However, Paul now makes it clear that he was not concerned with them building it incorrectly. He was saying they were in danger of tearing the building down altogether!

God will destroy that person. The one who destroys God's temple, in this context the church, is not part of God's people and so faces eternal destruction on the final day, just as God eventually destroyed the Babylonians who had destroyed Solomon's temple.

¹⁸ Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise.

1 Corinthians 3:18

Do not deceive yourselves. The Corinthians believed the rhetoric of wisdom that abounded in their age and believed that they were indeed wise. Paul advises them to become fools in the eyes of the world by shunning such wisdom, allowing themselves to then grasp the reality of the Gospel, i.e. so that you may become wise. The prophet recognised this human weakness: <<Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight!>> (Isaiah 5:21). Nothing has changed and his message is as valid today as it was then.

¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written,

‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’,

²⁰ and again,

‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise,
that they are futile.’

1 Corinthians 3:19-20

The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. Human beings are the most intelligent creatures on the planet, yet even their greatest wisdom cannot compare to God’s. However, the context here is more to do with the wisdom that persuades a man’s heart that he can stand alone without a creator God to guide and sustain him.

The first quotation (v.19b) is from Job 5:13, and the second from Psalm 94:11.

²¹ So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours,
²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, ²³ and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

1 Corinthians 3:21-23

Let no one boast about human leaders. Arrogance is at the root of the divisiveness in Corinth: <<*I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, ‘Nothing beyond what is written’, so that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another*>> (1 Corinthians 4:6), and: <<*But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant*>> (1 Corinthians 4:18). The Corinthians need to learn that they ultimately belong to God, not to the leader who baptised them: <<*Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptised none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptised in my name. (I did baptise also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptised anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power*>> (1 Corinthians 1:13-17), who was himself only fulfilling God’s purposes: <<*Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries*>> (1 Corinthians 4:1). They should, therefore, boast only in God: <<*God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’*>> (1 Corinthians 1:28-31).

All belong to you means that they are given by God for the benefit of his people.

You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. It is vital to get everything in the right order. Paul has developed, in several passages, a way of talking about the Christ and God in the same breath. This enables him to declare at the same time, first, that Jesus the Christ, is on God's side of the picture over against the whole world and the rest of the human race, and, second, that Jesus remains distinct from the God whom elsewhere he calls 'the father' or 'the creator'.

Paul did not take the time to write a long treatise about how this might all work out philosophically. He did not need to. It is enough to state, again and again as he does, that when Christians look up from the world, and from their own lives, they see, not a distant or unapproachable deity, not a vague divine force that they cannot know much about, but the God of Israel, the creator God, who has made himself known in and through Jesus.