

“The Trinity and the Church”¹

(1 Corinthians 3)

In the third chapter of 1 Corinthians is one of the most important passages in the New Testament in what it teaches us about the nature of the church. Paul uses three metaphors to describe the church.

- The first is an agricultural metaphor: *God's field* (v 9).
- The second is an architectural metaphor: *God's building* (v. 9).
- The third is an ecclesiastical metaphor: *God's temple* (v 16).

Let's now look at each of these in turn.

I. YOU ARE GOD'S FIELD (3:5-9)

As Paul begins to consider the metaphor ²of God's field he asks two questions in verse 5 to begin this thought: *What, then is Apollos? What is Paul?* Note that

¹ I have used much of the material in John Stott's book Basic Christian Leadership pages 79-93 in the writing of this sermon.

² Metaphor: (the following is taken from a lecture by Eugene Peterson called "Follow the Leader")

Jesus used metaphors as did St. Paul to invite us to imagine alternates ways of living. Metaphors wake up our imaginations so that we live more intensely and are more aware of the world infused with the voice of God. Metaphors like salt, light, bread, a door, to be born again are all metaphors Jesus used.

A Metaphor is literally a lie. It is simply not true. You are not salt and I am not light. You cannot sprinkle me on your poached egg in the morning. If I walk into a dark room it does not light up with the arrival of my presence. God is not a rock Geologist do not examine rocks to look for evidence of God. Why do we speak in metaphors and why is the bible so profuse in metaphor?

1. Metaphor requires participation if you are going to get it. It is a compressed story that releases energy and insight. As it embeds itself on our conscience we become involved. It pulls us into an involved participation
2. It involves us in a web of meaning. Everything is connected in the universe of sin and salvation. The world is like a complex organism in which there is meaning and purpose everywhere you look. Metaphor is the use of a word that involves us in the intricate interconnection of God's creation and covenant. Everything has to do with everything else especially you and God. It is highly personal language. It is relational and participatory. Metaphors get us into the action praying thinking and acting.

he does not use the masculine gender and ask politely, "Who?" He deliberately uses the neuter.

Now see how he replies to his own questions as to what he and Apollos are: *Servants through whom you came to believe*, (v. 5). That is, Paul and Apollos are not masters *to whom* the Corinthians owed allegiance but servants—only servants. Moreover, they are not servants *in whom* the Corinthians had believed, for they are not the objects of their faith. Neither are they servants *from whom* the Corinthians had believed, for they were not the authors of their faith. But they are servants *through whom* the Corinthians had come to believe (agents or instruments through whom God had worked to elicit their faith). Further, this came about “*as the Lord assigned to each.*” All three parts of verse 5 are designed to demote, even debunk, the leaders whom the Corinthians are improperly elevating.

In verses 6-8 the apostle identifies the different tasks that have to be done in the church, illustrating what these tasks are from his agricultural metaphor and applying them to himself and Apollos. There are three main tasks to be done if a field is to produce a harvest, namely planting the seed, watering the seed, and causing the seed to sprout; or sowing, irrigation and growth. Paul applies this to the Corinthian Church.

First, *I planted the seed*. That is, Paul reached Corinth first, during his second missionary journey, and evangelized the city (see Acts 18:1-18). Next, *Apollos watered it*. He followed Paul to Corinth. Luke recounts the story in Acts 18:24-26. These two men accomplished their pioneer tasks in relation to the seed.

But God gave the growth. -The tenses of the three verbs in verse 6 enforce Paul's point. "I planted" is a verb with a definite beginning and ending. Paul came to Corinth, proclaimed the gospel, planted the church and moved on. Then along came Apollos who watered the seed (again using the same kind of verb), and went on his way. But "God gave the growth" is an imperfect verb, (this means it is a verb that is an ongoing action) God was giving growth to the seed. In verse 7 Paul, says that the one who is indispensable causing the seed to sprout and bear fruit is God. No human being can do this. Paul could not do it with all his apostolic authority. Apollos could not do it with all his knowledge of the Scriptures and his famous eloquence. It is

God who gives the growth.

What lesson are we intended to learn from this first metaphor? Like most metaphors it is intended to highlight one main point, namely that in God's field (the church) it is God's activity that really matters. God allocates the tasks. God gives the growth. God rewards the laborers.

What the servants are called to do is ensure that the seed being planted and the care given to the seed is of the right kind. There is only one reason why the church exists which is to give glory to God as we bring our lives more fully under the authority of God's divine revelation. As we understand this principle we will be a community that will grow in having our lives shaped fully by a biblical understanding. I would like to suggest that the more we do this the more fully we cooperate with God who brings the growth. I am not thinking primarily here about numerical growth although that may be one of the outcomes. No I am talking about growing in how we live so that we reflect more fully the presence of Jesus Christ. This is because, as we considered over the previous two Sundays, God's enlightening, eternal and external wisdom is influencing our lives more fully as we live under the authority of the Bible.

YOU ARE GOD'S BUILDING (3:9-16)

As the Holy Spirit works within the church bringing us to a deeper revelation of God's will for our lives we not only experience more of the growth God provides but we will also know what it mean to be God's building.

As with the previous metaphor this one also illustrates what it means to be *God's servants, working together*. The emphasis with this second metaphor focuses on God's building whose only foundation can be Christ crucified.

Paul's main point in these verses is to sound a warning to all Christian teachers in regard both to the foundation they lay and to the superstructure they erect on it: *each one should be careful how he builds* (1 Cor 3:10). What kind of "carefulness" does he have in mind?

The foundation. Builders should not tamper with a house's foundation once it has been laid, trying to dig it up or relay it. "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ" (v 11).

The Jesus Paul has in mind here is the Jesus of the apostolic witness, who is the only authentic Jesus—namely, Jesus the crucified one.

The *superstructure*. Builders also have to be very careful about the materials they use in erecting the superstructure. Broadly speaking, there are only two possibilities. One is *gold, silver, precious stones* (probably marble). These are valuable and durable and represent true Christian teaching that will stand the test of time and of the judgment day. The other possibility is *wood, hay of straw*. These are cheap, perishable materials and represent teaching that is without conviction and draws more on the wisdom of the world than it does on God's wisdom. . In both cases the quality of the materials used by the builders (i.e., the teachers) *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.* ³ (1 Cor 3:12-13).

What will be the result of this trial by fire? Just as there are two possible materials, so there will be two results. On the one hand, if the builder's work is made of durable material (gold, silver, marble) it will survive, and *he will receive his reward* (v. 14). On the other hand, if his work is made of combustible materials (wood, hay, straw), it- will be consumed. In this case *he will suffer loss*, and his teaching will be seen to be valueless. But in the mercy of *God* the worker will be saved, as we might say, by the skin of his teeth. *“If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.* (v 15). He will lose his reward but not his salvation.

Paul issues a solemn warning here to all Christian teachers. The Christian teaching ministry is of the greatest importance because it is designed to build up the church. If what we teach is true, biblical and balanced, always keeping the crucified Jesus as the foundation, we shall be adding a valuable building to this foundation, and it will last. If, however, our teaching is unbiblical, the wisdom of the world, then we are adding a ramshackle superstructure that will not survive. Thus what pastors teach will bless or harm the church not only for time but even for eternity.

3. YOU ARE GOD'S TEMPLE (3:16-17)

³*The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

First Corinthians 3:16-17 is an extension of Paul's architectural metaphor, since of course a temple is a building. But the apostle develops it differently, since he is thinking of one particular and religious building, the Jerusalem temple, indeed the inner sanctuary. The most holy place. Then he turns this into a metaphor by asking at verse 16: *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?* No fewer than ten times in this letter the apostle asks the same question, *Don't you know?* He attributes the Corinthians' failures to their ignorance or forgetfulness. If only they knew who they are in Christ, they would behave differently. Paul sees Christian understanding as the key to Christian holiness, especially our understanding of our identity as the people of God.

In the New Testament God's temple or dwelling place is his people. The sacred wonder of the church, therefore, is that it is the dwelling place of God by his Spirit. Of course, "church" means people, not buildings, and God's presence is tied not to buildings but to his covenant people, to whom he has pledged himself.

Because of the sacred nature of the Christian community as the dwelling place of God, it must not be dishonored in any way—divided by jealousies and rivalries, deceived by false teaching or defiled by immoral conduct. These things are acts of sacrilege; they effectively destroy the church, for they destroy its unique identity as the holy people of God indwelt by the Spirit of God. *And if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is holy, and you are that temple* (1 Cor 3:17). This is a severe statement. But then to destroy the church (by dividing, deceiving or defiling it) is an extremely serious offense. So a deliberate act of violence against the church is an act against God

Given what Paul has been saying about Christian leadership in this chapter I would suggest that verse 17 applies particularly to those who are in Christian leadership. Those who would destroy the church are people who rather than sowing the seed of God's wisdom are sowing the seeds of heresy. This word comes from a group of Greek words that mean "to choose" and a "sect". What heretics do is to sift and choose what they will teach. In sifting and choosing they may decide to throw out what is biblical wisdom for something that is contrary to the clear teaching of God's holy and revealed word. When they do this what is being sown are not the seeds of the Gospel but the weeds of deception. Such teaching will come under the judgement of God and such teachers says Paul will

be destroyed by God.⁴

Why does Paul speak with such a serious tone here? It is because the church does not belong to us it belongs to the Holy Trinity. For here Paul highlights the role of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in relation to the church, and it thereby downplays the role of human beings, especially of leaders. What matters most about the church, Paul insists, is that as God's field its growth is caused by God himself, as God's building its only foundation is Jesus Christ, and as God's temple it is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. This is the apostle's comprehensive vision of the church. It owes its existence and growth to God the Father. It is built on the foundation of God the Son. It is indwelt by God the Holy Spirit. It is a unique, trinitarian community There is no other community in the world that even remotely resembles it.

Because of this those who are entrusted to teach the Church cannot teach heresy but the wisdom that is from God. When this happens seed will be sown that God will bless, and the building will be erected that is lasting and eternal because it is being built on the foundation which is Jesus Christ with *gold, silver and, precious stones.*

Amen

⁴ For a parabolic treatment of this theme look at the Parable of the Weeds in Matthew 13:24 ff.