

## **Building Wisely** **1 Corinthians 3:1-23**

How do you go about building a church? What are the important ingredients? There are all sorts of ideas around these days.

- Some try to build seeker-sensitive churches. They design the entire church service around the seeker – the non-Christian they hope to attract. Non-Christians don't like singing in public, so they get rid of congregational singing and have performed music instead. Non-Christians think all the church is after is money, so they don't have an offering. The sermons focus on topics that interest non-Christians.
- Some try to build homogenous churches. People like to be with people of their own sort and so they build a church of like people. They target a certain group within their overall community – middle-class whites; working class people; immigrants; or whatever.
- Some try to take the church to the community. So we have coffee-shop churches, churches in pubs, theatre churches, drive-in churches, etc. There are all sorts of unusual churches springing up.
- Some try to build churches by dynamic leadership. If there's a bright energetic, charismatic figure out front, then people will flock to their church.

And so the list goes on – fancy buildings, good coffee, caring people, sense of acceptance, excellent children's program. There are all sorts of theories as to what makes a successful church. And there's a lot of good, useful stuff amongst this material.

Yet, in it all, we must be careful of certain dangers:

- The danger of adopting a non-Christian definition of what a successful church is.
- The danger of adopting non-Christian ideas of what ministry and church leadership is.
- The danger of using non-Christian methods to try to build a successful church.
- The danger of building a church structure that's inconsistent with the gospel message itself.

There was a church at Corinth. Paul started it. He was no longer in Corinth. Other people took over the leadership of the church. They were building the church at Corinth. And they had quite a lively church with exciting meetings. But, were they building the church the right way? Did they really understand Christian ministry? Chapter 3 deals with these sorts of issues – still within the context of challenging them about their quarrels.

### **Time to Grow Up??**

It's a big passage tonight. I aim to deal with the big picture. I won't cover all the details. However, once we get the big picture firmly in mind, I think many details fall more easily into place.

So, the first paragraph. Verses 1 to 4:

*Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?*

As we've seen over the last couple of weeks, in Paul's thinking there are only two types of people:

- The non-Christian: the person without God's Spirit. This person doesn't understand God's wisdom that's demonstrated in *Christ crucified*. Instead, they seek for and live by the so-called wisdom of this world – a wisdom that boasts in personal achievements.
- The Christian: the person with God's Spirit (or the *spiritual* person). They accept God's wisdom as declared in the gospel. They allow the gospel to be the central factor in life. They evaluate life – all of life – from the perspective of the gospel.

For Paul, those two categories are mutually exclusive: either you follow the world's wisdom or you accept God's wisdom; either you're a non-Christian or a Christian.

The Corinthians want to add a third category: the spiritually mature. According to them:

- A person becomes a Christian by accepting the gospel, by accepting God's wisdom of the cross, but then they go on to deeper knowledge or wisdom that enables them to rise above your everyday garden variety of Christian.
- A person starts off as a mere infant, but then they grow into an adult by being taught God's secret wisdom that isn't given to all Christians.
- A person starts off as a Christian by drinking milk, but then goes on to solid food.

The focus is on this special knowledge or special wisdom that allows them to climb above the pack. It fosters pride – and that should get the alarm bells ringing because pride is incompatible with God's wisdom. Pride's incompatible with Christian maturity. They want to build their church on the world's wisdom and the world's values –

and that's clearly demonstrated in their behaviour.

Now, Paul does speak of Christians growing to maturity in his letters. Yet, what Paul means by that is totally different from what the Corinthians mean.

- The Corinthians talk about gaining a knowledge of some secret wisdom that means they're better than others. For them, maturity's all about getting the extra knowledge and wisdom. They want to leave the so-called gospel milk behind and progress to what they think is solid food.
- Paul, on the other hand, refers to a growing understanding of God's wisdom displayed in the cross that transforms their lives into godly people. Paul talks about allowing the cross to further impact their lives – about dying more and more to self in how they live. It isn't some new, secret knowledge; it's the total application of God's wisdom he's already told them about.

Because of this clash of understanding, Paul introduces a new word in these verses: the NIV translates it *worldly*; some older versions use the word *carnal*. This describes the contradiction the Corinthians are:

- Paul knows they're Christians because they accepted the gospel and have God's Spirit. Thus, they fit into the category of *spiritual*.
- But they aren't acting like Christians. They follow worldly wisdom rather than God's wisdom. They boast and don't display humility. They're jealous and quarrelling and don't display their unity in Jesus. They thus strip the gospel of its real power to change people. Their attitudes and their behaviour show their immaturity.

These different "parties" – the Apollos party and the Paul party – aren't signs of maturity and great spirituality (as the Corinthians thought); rather, they're signs of worldliness. They're signs of failure to grow in godliness. Godly living is the sign of spiritual maturity – not lots of knowledge or special abilities.

### Putting People in their Place

Their quarrels about their different leaders show they haven't properly understood God's wisdom – nor have they understood the nature of Christian leadership. Verse 5:

*What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.*

By arguing about Christian ministers this way, they show a basic misunderstanding of what Christian ministry's all about. Paul uses an illustration – a plantation or a farm. What makes up the plantation?

- There's the property itself – the piece of ground where all the planting's done.
- There's the owner of the property – he decides what's planted and what happens to the profits.
- There are the owner's servants – the people who prepare the field and plant the seed and water the plants and do the harvesting.

Who's the important person on the plantation – the owner or the servants? The owner.

And, Paul says, that's exactly how it is in Corinth as well. The important one is God. God owns the church. God assigns His servants their different tasks. God makes His church grow. The focus is always to remain on God. If you want to boast, boast in God and about God.

Who then are Paul and Apollos – the ones the Corinthians boasted about? They're just servants under God's direction. They're people to whom God gave tasks.

- Paul had the task of planting the church at Corinth. He was the first to preach the gospel there.
- Apollos had the task of watering the church, that is, of helping the church grow

But they aren't the important ones. They merely do the jobs God assigned them. They're servants accountable to God for their work. The important One is God. The Corinthians' boasting shows they've missed the point as far as Christian ministry is concerned.

And so the emphasis of the phrase *God's fellow-workers* is they are fellow-workers with each other and all under God. God is the boss. God assigns the tasks. They work alongside each other to achieve God's purposes. They each have their role to play – but there's no room for boasting about the different servants.

Once again, this relates to God's wisdom as revealed in the cross.

- Worldly wisdom looks for distinctions. It looks for ways we can say some people are better than others. It searches for means for people to climb to the top

and demonstrate the greatness of their leadership. It looks for people to boast about. It looks for areas of superiority.

- God's wisdom is different. He brings everyone in on the same basis – His grace. We're already at the top (if you want to put it that way). How's leadership expressed in the church? Who are Paul and Apollos? Only servants – those who understand the wisdom of the cross and who allow the message of the cross to determine their leadership.

It hasn't changed today. In a later letter, Paul says those desiring leadership in the church desire a good thing. But if you desire it because you think it'll give you position and prestige, you misunderstand God's wisdom. You must think through again what the implications of the cross are for your understanding of Christian leadership. You must understand what Jesus means by saying the greatest in His kingdom is the slave of all.

### **Building with the Right Materials**

At the end of verse 9, Paul changes his illustration from a field to a building. Verse 10:

*By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer*

*loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

The NIV uses the term *expert* builder. The word Paul uses is *wise*. Now, that word can certainly be translated as *expert* – but to do so misses some of the connection with the preceding context. The contrast is between *God's wisdom* and *the world's wisdom*. *Wisdom* is a key word in this whole passage. Paul is a *wise* builder – that is, he builds with an understanding of God's wisdom and on the basis of that wisdom.

What point does he make with this illustration? He warns those working on God's building (or in God's field, if you prefer the previous illustration) – that is, he warns God's servants. The foundation is laid – namely, Jesus. But in saying that, Paul has in mind what he already wrote. He's talking about Jesus as God's wisdom. He's talking about Jesus in the sense of *Christ crucified*. That's the foundation of the Corinthian church. Indeed, that's the foundation for any church. There is no other foundation.

Having got that foundation in place, the building goes up. Others are involved to complete the building. They need to take care they use materials consistent with the proper foundation.

- Paul lists six types of materials: gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, straw. Some people go to extraordinary lengths to identify each of those six things. Some people resort to allegory to identify them.
- That isn't Paul's point. Paul only talks about two things: those that survive fire (examples of which are gold, silver and costly stones) and those that are destroyed by fire (such as wood, hay straw).

The issue he deals with is this: how do you build on the foundation of Jesus? The answer is: you must use materials consistent with the foundation. What materials are consistent? It is still the same contrast Paul draws right throughout this passage.

- If you use materials based on God's wisdom (that is, if you use materials based on the message of *Christ crucified*), then those things will last. They'll survive the fire. They're the gold, silver and costly stones.
- However, if you use materials based on the world's wisdom, then those things won't last. The fire will destroy them. They're the wood, hay and straw.

Paul challenges those currently building in Corinth. Does their building work fit with the foundation of Jesus? The answer seems to be "no".

- Paul heard stories of quarrels based on leaders.
- Paul heard stories about people thinking in worldly categories of what the world thinks wise.

It may look like there's lots of building work going on in Corinth – but to Paul it looks like most of that work used materials that won't last.

### **Building – not Destroying**

And so Paul gives a very strong warning. Verse 16:

*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.*

Who's the temple? Here, it's the Corinthian church. Paul isn't talking about them as individuals here. It's quite true

God's Spirit does live in the lives of individual Christians. But that's not Paul's point here. Here he talks about the church as a whole. That follows from the building illustration he's just used. Together, they're built into God's temple – one particular type of building. And as God's holy temple, God's Spirit dwells among them.

They're supposed to be God's special people in Corinth. As such, they're supposed to demonstrate a different lifestyle – an alternative community to the various pagan religions and trading guilds. Their job's to demonstrate what God's community looks like – a community in right relationship with God and one another; a community living according to God's holy standards. They were failing at several levels.

Here, Paul particularly warns those building with the wrong materials. By bringing worldly categories into the church they're causing quarrels. Those worldly values damage people at the individual level. More importantly, they damage the church at the corporate level. And so he warns them: it's a very serious business to destroy the building God's putting up. It's a very strong and serious warning Paul gives. The local church should function as a genuine alternative in the midst of a pagan world. That's how God wants it to function. It's always serious when people build churches in a way that prevents them being that.

### **Being Fools for God**

Paul concludes in verse 18:

*Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom*

*of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.*

God overturns the categories. The Corinthians want to be considered *wise* by this world's standards. Perhaps they even thought Christianity gave them a greater status in this world. After all, as Paul said back in chapter 1, not many of them had much status before becoming Christians. Maybe some joined the Christian club hoping to advance their social standing in Corinth.

But, says Paul, that isn't the way to true wisdom. You must reject that whole way of thinking – that should have happened when you became Christians. As far as the world's concerned, you became a fool when you accepted the Christian message – God's wisdom. If you want acceptance in terms of the world's wisdom, then you haven't understood the gospel.

Do you expect the pastor to have any standing in the secular community? Do you think the pastor should be able to walk into Aldi and get a discount simply because he's a pastor? That's just not how the secular system works. They think us foolish. The fact our society has some respect for pastors is a hangover from our Christian roots. Don't expect it to last much longer.

Now, please note: it's not that the gospel is nonsense.

The gospel can be explained quite sensibly in human terms. And the gospel does have a certain logic in terms of the way God goes about His rescue mission. It's not that we're asked to make a leap in the dark. The gospel's based firmly on historical facts. And the gospel makes perfect sense, when it's properly understood.

But, the gospel won't be arrived at chasing after human wisdom. And the gospel goes against our normal human thinking.

- The gospel says I can't earn or achieve my salvation – I can only receive it as a gift from God. Human wisdom says I have to pay my own way.
- The gospel says God died on the cross to rescue me from my sin and its consequences. Human wisdom mocks the weakness and humiliation involved in the concept of a God dying to save mere mortals.

In the closing verses, Paul again turns the tables on them. He again shows them how God's wisdom is superior to the world's wisdom:

- They boast about particular men – I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas.
- They've missed the point. Because they belong to Jesus, all these other things are theirs as well. In Jesus, they're blessed with every spiritual blessing. In Jesus, the believer possesses all things.

It isn't that the Corinthians belong to Apollos or Paul, but that Paul and Apollos and everything else belongs to them because they're in Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Do people repeat the Corinthian error today? Yes – in all sorts of ways.

- Just as some people try to climb the corporate ladder, so some people try to work their way to the top of what they perceive to be the church ladder.
- Just as some people try to achieve status or importance within the community, so some people see the church as an easier option – they try to achieve their status and importance within the church.
- Just as some people attach themselves to certain gurus within the wider community, so some people attach themselves to certain church gurus.
- Just as some people put various community leaders and so-called important people on a pedestal, so some people also put church leaders on a pedestal.
- Some church people are still "wise" enough today to tell God whom He can and can't use in ministry.

Always we must come back to Christ crucified. That's God's wisdom and God's power. That's our model.