

The thrust of Paul's argument is as follows:

In chapter 1 Paul began by saying, "I exhort you, brethren . . . that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I heard . . . that there are quarrels among you" (1:10-11).

In 1:17- 2:5 it appears that the real problem was the Corinthians' love for worldly wisdom. He therefore, rebukes those who pursue human wisdom, for they minimize the wisdom of God in the gospel and strip it of its power.

However, Paul is not opposed to all types of wisdom. In 2:6-16 he argues that Christians actually possess a greater wisdom than the world does. They have wisdom from the mind of God (i.e. the mystery of the gospel) which is revealed by the Spirit.

Paul now contrasts true spirituality with the Corinthians' actions. Though the Corinthians saw themselves as spiritual, Paul flatly tells them that they are not (3:1-4). Their quarrelling is undeniable evidence against them. They need to *stop thinking* and *stop acting* like people of the world.

3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.

3:2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able,

3:3(a) for you are still fleshly

Verses 1 and 2 apply 2:6-16 to the Corinthian situation. Once again, we should note that Paul is comparing the church with unbelievers, not two groups of Christians.

- Though Paul addresses them as "brethren," this is a term used of the church as a whole (cf. 1:10, 11, 26, 2:1, 4:6 etc.), not strictly of believers.
- In addition, the second person plural pronouns ["you"] make it clear that only one group is in mind.

- Lastly, in 2:6-16 we have seen that "mature" is synonymous with Christian and is the opposite of "infants" in 3:1.

We should also note that Paul is speaking about a past meeting he had with them, as the past tense verbs, "I . . . *could* not. . . I *gave*. . . you *were* not able" make clear.

Four words should be defined: "natural men", "men of flesh", "fleshly," and "infants."

1. **Natural men** in 2:14 are men who don't have the Spirit of God at all and cannot understand the things of God. Paul does not use this term to describe the Corinthians.
2. "**Men of flesh**" emphasizes people who place the physical over the spiritual side of life (Fee, 124). Barrett says they are people "whose existence is determined not by God but by considerations internal to themselves" (80).
3. "**Fleshly**" is "a word with clear ethical overtones of living from the perspective of the present age, therefore out of one's sinfulness" (Fee, 124).
4. "**Infants**" in Christ could simply refer to new believers, and most commentators interpret it this way (Morris, Plummer, Hodge, Barrett, Moffatt, etc.). In other places, "children" was a loving term used of Paul's relationship to people he had led to Christ (I Thess. 2:7, 11; I Cor. 4:14-16; II Cor. 6:13; Gal. 4:19; Phil. 2:22; Phlm. 10). Therefore, these commentators believe that when verse 1 says that Paul gave them milk (the basics), he is simply saying that he had to accommodate his teaching to their level of knowledge as young Christians; the deeper truths (the meat) would come later. However, this only makes sense if we see a diversion from what Paul has just said in chapter 2. Therefore, a second interpretation may be better. When Paul calls the Corinthians "infants", he is using a pejorative, meaning "immature" (cf. 13:11; 14:20; also Eph. 4:14). This view has the following advantages: (1) "Infant" in this context is not contrasted with "mature" but with "spiritual." Paul was not simply saying that they were still young in their faith, but that they were immature in their thinking, not spiritually minded. (2) Paul had just said that the mature are those who are able to perceive the wisdom of God found in the gospel (2:6). If Paul was stating that the gospel is elemental

(milk), he would be agreeing with the Corinthians' understanding of it and conceding to a point he just vigorously opposed in 2:6-16. (3) The reason they could not receive the message as meat was because they were still fleshly (gar - γάρ 3:3a), not because they were simply young in the faith. (4) Paul identified them as fleshly because of (gar - γάρ 3:4) their ungodly behavior.

In this interpretation, the Corinthians' desire for worldly wisdom and their view that the gospel was milk revealed their ungodly mindset. They acted like unbelievers (men of flesh) and did not appreciate the gospel as solid food. The gospel was both the entry point of faith (milk) and the reality that the whole Christian life is predicated upon (solid food). "The Corinthians did not need a change in diet, but a change in perspective" (Fee, 125). They were not just children who needed to grow, but immature adults who needed to adjust their attitude (Thiselton).

This interpretation of 3:1-4 is consistent with the way Paul had just described them. His goal was still "to move the Corinthians from their present fascination with wisdom back to the pure gospel of the crucified Christ." The problem, he insists, is not on his side, but on theirs. "I could not" (explain the cross as God's wisdom in mystery) "because you could not" (so understand it, given your "advancement" in the wrong direction). "The problem, it turns out, is not with the message at all, but with those who had put themselves in a position so as not to be able to hear and understand what was being said to them" (Fee, 126).

Thus, I Corinthians 3:1-3a is to be understood as follows:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men [as believers who understand the depth of the mystery of the gospel], **but as to men of flesh** [as people whose minds were focused on human pursuits], **as to infants in Christ** [as people who lack true wisdom and whose immature thinking was like that of the unbelieving]. **I gave you milk to drink, not solid food** [I gave you milk, for you could not appreciate and accept the meat of the gospel]; **for you were not yet able to receive it** [the reason the gospel was not received as solid food was because you refused to accept it as such - 2:6]. **Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly** [because you are living from the perspective of the present age, you still cannot see the gospel as meat].

As proof that they still do not understand the true nature of the gospel, Paul points to their actions that witness against their own assessment of their spiritual maturity.

3:3(b) For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

"For" explains how Paul knows that their thinking was immature (i.e. that they had the mindset of an unbeliever). No matter how spiritual they thought they were, their jealousy and strife showed that they had the mindset of the world, not the mind of Christ.

3:3(b) ties 3:1-3 to 2:6-16. A mere man (unbeliever) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are spiritually discerned (2:14). Therefore, he sees the cross as foolishness. Furthermore, his sinful behavior provides additional evidence that he has not grasped the gospel (2:8). However, the mystery of the gospel has been revealed to those who have the Spirit (2:11-13). This puts the Corinthians in a particularly deplorable state. They had received the Spirit and understood the gospel, which should have changed their thinking and behavior, but they continued to think and act like natural men.

3:4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men?

Verse 4 brings the whole discussion back to 1:10-12 and the disunity within the church. In view of what Paul has just said in 3:1-3, their actions made them look like unbelievers, not like people who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion: Paul clearly believes that the church of Corinth was made of saved individuals. But these who had started off well by receiving the gospel had somehow gotten sidetracked with human wisdom. The result was disastrous. The road that they were on had caused them to fall short of realizing the implications that the gospel had on their lives. They were becoming more like the world in their ways than like Christ, though they believed that they were advancing in their faith. Paul cannot endure their arrogance. He insists that they are immature in their understanding and this immaturity has now been manifested in divisions, quarrels, and jealousy. His goal is to get them to turn back to the gospel where true wisdom

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and maturity is found. He wants them to start thinking and acting like Christians. He will now move on to show how the leadership in the church should function and be viewed.

3:5 What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.

Paul doesn't ask *who* is Apollos, or *who* is Paul? He asks *what* are they? They were simply instruments through whom God by His grace had chosen to work; they were nothing more than that. Paul, Apollos, or other leaders were not idols or masters under whom people were to align themselves (1:10-12), but servants who simply worked the farm, whose different tasks came from God and whose success depended entirely upon God.

3:5 Paul and Apollos are servants	God assigned them the task
3:6 Paul planted Apollos watered	God caused the growth
3:7 the planter and waterer are nothing	But God gives the growth in everything
3:8 the planter and waterer are equal	God will give each the proper reward for their labor

The Corinthians' boasting, jealousy, and personal favorites showed that they were acting as mere men (3:4) but also showed that they did not understand how a church worked, or the purpose of Christian ministry.

Paul viewed himself as a servant, as did Jesus (Mk. 10:45). The opportunities that were given to Paul, Apollos, or any other leader came from the Lord. They had no claim to anything they did.

Paul has two concerns: "(1) that they recognize that the differences between Apollos and himself, which had become occasions for strife, are in fact Christ-appointed for their *common good*; and (2) that they focus not on the servants, but on the Lord himself, whose servants they all are to be" (Fee, 131).

3:6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.

As the rest of the analogy reveals, Paul is not talking about the conversion of individuals but the starting of a church.

In this analogy:

- Paul is the one who evangelized the people (planted the seed)
- Apollos taught them (watered it)
- God caused the growth (imperfect tense, God caused and continues to cause spiritual and numerical growth)
- The field is the church of Corinth

God both owns the field and causes the produce to grow. The leaders are simply laborers, each with their own task. As laborers, they have different jobs but work with one goal in mind - to fulfill the Master's desires.

3:7 So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.

"The only significance of planter and waterer is that God accepts their labor and works through them (verse 9); they have no independent importance" (Barrett, 85). Paul broadcast the seed. Apollos watered it. But planting and watering are nothing. The miracle is in the growth which can only be attributed to God.

3:8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward (or, pay) according to his own labor.

Verse 7 focused on the source of productivity - God. Verse 8 focuses on the servants' tasks. The believer's objective is to do all that can be done to produce an abundant harvest for the Owner. They are to work together as one. They are to be unified. They are to have the same goal. Paul and Apollos are allies, not rivals.

The owner determines the pay of the laborers based on their individual labor. They should, therefore, be careful how they work (3:10, 14).

3:9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

"For" explains the main point of this farming analogy, namely, both the workers and the field (the church) belong to God. In this verse, "God" is in an emphatic position in Greek; literally, "God's we are co-workers, God's cultivation, God's construction you are" (Garland, 111). Being co-workers probably means they are fellow workers belonging to God, for servants are not generally considered co-

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workers with the master, and the emphasis of the passage is the equality of the workers and their nothingness without God (Garland, 113)

The image of the cultivator and the waterer makes a number of different points (cf Garland, 111-112):

1. The labor of one without the other would be useless - both are interdependent and complimentary, contributing to the same goal of producing a crop.

2. Both laborers are essential for the task; they are to be regarded as "one." The value of one laborer over another is not to enter into our thinking; rather what is important is that God can use their labor.

3. Rivalry between a planter and irrigator working the field is absurd. The field is not a battlefield where workers vie with one another for supremacy; it is a farmland where both are working to produce fruit.

4. God is the life force that produces the harvest. Planters only scatter seed supplied to them by God. Paul uses the aorist tense to describe the work of the workers (I planted, Apollos watered - their actions are viewed as singular completed events), but he uses the imperfect tense to describe the work of God (God was causing the growth - meaning that God was continually at work during the planting and watering process). The point is that success doesn't depend on the worker, but on God throughout the entire process.

5. Beyond the grace given, Paul tells us that each person receives an individual reward for his labor.

Paul also introduces another metaphor comparable to the field; "you are God's building." This new analogy becomes the subject in the verses that follow.

3:10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it.

Although Paul is still speaking primarily of the church's leadership, the emphasis shifts to the reward of the laborer. Paul's concern is that those building the church take heed lest their work be consumed in the test to come.

Some things that need to be remembered are that (1) the church, not the individual, is the building. Paul is not talking about how we build upon another's life, but how we build the church. (2) God is still the owner. (3) The believer (in this case Paul) is still the laborer.

Verse 10 is somewhat parallel to what has preceded. Paul sowed the seed in verse 6 (the first step), now he lays the foundation. In verse 5 he said that God gave him opportunity to work, here he refers to this God-given opportunity as the grace of God.

The foundation Paul laid was the news about the crucified Christ. This was the only foundation that would last. By laying this foundation, he was truly a "wise" master builder.

The Corinthians, however, were careless in their construction of the superstructure. They had changed the building's shape and had tried to redo the foundation. Paul, therefore, issues a warning to them; "be careful how you build!" Laborers need God-given wisdom to build, but the direction in which the Corinthians were heading was destroying the church.

3:11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

"For" tells the reason to be careful in building. Once more he reiterates the emphasis from chapter 1. The only foundation that can be laid is Christ and His crucifixion, not one made with human wisdom or by human strength.

3:12 Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

3:13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.

In verse 10 Paul warned that each man who builds upon the foundation "must be careful how he builds on it." Verse 12 elaborates upon this.

The mention of various materials is tied to Paul's concern that those who build need to be careful about what is added to the foundation. The contrast is not primarily related to the value of each material but to their quality. In fact, we could argue that the gold, silver and precious stones represent those things that are compatible with the gospel of the crucified Christ. That is, "the quality of the superstructure must be appropriate to the foundation" (Fee, 140).

It is probably significant that these same costly materials were common in the construction of the temple (cf. 3:16-17).

13(a) is the conclusion to Paul's sentence "if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw . . . his work will become evident." Someday the quality of each man's work will be made known, for a day is coming when our work will be tested with fire. The fire will reveal the quality of the materials used from a divine perspective.

Whatever remains after the blaze will be rewarded. If the Corinthians continue to build upon the church with human wisdom or experiences, the fire will consume their work like straw. [Note: The worker is not being purified by the process but the quality of his work is being revealed.]

3:14 If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward.

3:15 If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

The idea of a reward reminds us of verse 8, "each will receive his own reward according to his own labor." God will pay out according to what the laborer had put in.

God rewards us according to His grace, not as an obligation (Ro. 4:4-5). That is, the reward is a gift, not something the individual has earned himself. God is the one who gives the laborer opportunity (3:5). He is also the one who causes our efforts to succeed (3:6-7). This passage does not state what the reward is, only that there is both reward and loss.

The nature of the loss is determined by the context. First, we should see that the work that is burned is work related to building the church. This is confirmed by verse 17 where Paul threatens those who destroy the temple of God (i.e. the church). Secondly, it is clear that the loss does not include a loss of salvation for Paul specifically says, "he will be saved." The imagery is similar to Amos 4:11 where Amos speaks of Israel in terms of a firebrand snatched from a blaze and means that the person will be pulled out of the fire just in the nick of time. "It will be as one who dashes through the flames, safe, but with the smell of fire on him" (Barrett, 89). It is probable that the loss is the loss of potential reward that would have been the laborer's if he had built properly. If the Owner only pays the worker for what remains after the building is burned down, the worker will lose pay (reward) for anything that does not stand the test.

Thus, Paul is neither speaking of purgatory nor of salvation by works. Neither is he telling a believer how to build his life. Paul's goal is that the church return to the gospel and begin building itself with things that are worthy of the foundation. In the final analysis, this is true of all believers but is of particular importance to the leaders. "It is unfortunately possible for people to attempt to build the church out of every imaginable human system predicated on merely human wisdom, be it philosophy, "pop" psychology, managerial techniques, relational "good feelings," or what have you. But at the final judgment, all such building (and perhaps countless other forms, where systems have become more important than the gospel itself) will be shown for what it is; something merely human, with no character of Christ or His gospel in it" (Fee, 145).

Carson summarizes 3:5-15 (Reflections on Assurance),

"Because the Corinthians' carnality is displayed in their propensity to form parties attached to particular leaders, Paul finds it necessary to explain the limited contribution such leaders have made. He develops two extended metaphors. The first is agricultural (3:5-9): Paul planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God alone made it grow. Both the sower and the one who waters the seed have one purpose. Each "will be rewarded according to his own labor" (3:8). In this metaphor, the Corinthians do not figure as laborers. Paul and Apollos are "God's fellow workers"; the Corinthians are "God's field" (v. 9).

Then the metaphor changes, but with the same distinctions firmly in place. The Corinthians are "God's building" (v. 9); Paul is the contractor who has laid the foundation, Jesus Christ himself, with others building on the foundation that he laid. Within the constraints of this metaphor, it is the builder whose work will be shown up for what it is on the last day; the fire will test the quality of each builder'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" (3:14-15). . . .

Maintaining the metaphor drawn from the building industry, Paul specifies that the Corinthians are not merely a building, but God's temple, his dwelling. If "anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple." It is possible to read these verses as nothing more than a forceful reiteration of the lesson drawn in verses 10-15. Nevertheless, because Paul now speaks of "anyone" and not simply the builders, it suggests, in the context of the first four chapters, that those given to division, jealousy, and quarreling in the church are also in danger of doing damage to the church, God's temple. Since they are that temple, they are simultaneously doing damage to themselves and courting God's judgment.

It appears, then, that in this chapter Paul acknowledges that Christians do not always live up to what they are called to be, that every such failure is a serious breach, that those who do damage to the church are particularly threatened by God's judgment, and that some who are viewed as leaders in the church, although they will themselves be saved on the day of judgment, will have nothing to show for their labor."

3:16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

In 3:9 Paul metaphorically referred to God's people as a building. In verse 16 he describes what type of building we are. Collectively, we are the temple of God. This description helps the Corinthians understand the nature of the church and also shows them how serious it is when someone destroys it through division (3:17).

There are two words commonly used in Greek that are translated as "temple;" *naos* (ναός) and *hieron* (ἱερόν). *Naos* (ναός) most commonly most often refers to the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary, where the presence of God

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resided, while *hieron* (ἱερόν) includes both the temple precinct and the sanctuary. In the OT the people were never called "the temple" but the temple building in the midst of Israel signified God's personal presence among His people. The church (i.e. believers), however, is the *naos* (ναός) of God, the holy place where God Himself dwells.

"You" is plural, referring to the church collectively, not to individuals (contrast 6:19). "That is, here Paul is reflecting upon the church as the corporate place of God's dwelling, who, when gathered in Jesus' name, experienced the presence and power of the Lord Jesus in their midst (5:4-5)" (Fee, 147).

3:17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

The Corinthians were in danger of destroying God's temple through the pursuit of worldly wisdom and division. Paul warns against such behavior in the severest terms. The person who destroys the church is destroying the very Temple where the Holy Spirit dwells. He will, therefore, be destroyed by God. The reason ("for") for such severity is that "the temple of God is holy," that is, it is set apart for God and was not to be desecrated in any way.

This verse has been greatly abused by Christians who forget the context and confuse this illustration of the church with the imagery of 6:19 where the believer's body is called the temple of God. Some have even attempted to interpret this as a believer who commits suicide, loses his salvation, and is ultimately destroyed by God. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Most Christians take the local church all too lightly. They fail to realize who they are and the great impact that they can have on the society in which they live.

3:18 Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise.

Paul concludes his argument in the last 6 verses of the chapter and warns believers of self-deception (cf. 6:9; 15:33; Gal. 6:3, 7). The comment "If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age" is irony, because he knows that that is exactly how the people in the church in Corinth see themselves. This has been Paul's admonishment in chapters 1 and 2. Those who pursue worldly wisdom, who are

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causing divisions in the church, and who are destroying the church are self-deceived. Their deception will lead to their own destruction so Paul warns them to turn from the wisdom of this age (the age that is passing away - 2:6; also called the wisdom of the world in 3:19 and 1:21) and return to the foolishness of the gospel which is the wisdom of God (1:20-29).

If anyone desires to be wise in God's eyes he must believe and do what appears to be foolish to the world. He must renounce his own wisdom to receive the wisdom of God (Hodge, 60).

3:19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS":

3:20 and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS."

Paul backs the exhortation of verse 18 with quotes from Psalm 94:11 and Job 5:13. His use of the OT explains the same truth of 1:18-25, only in a converse way. There he said that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world (cf. 1:18, 19). Here he says that the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God. God's perspective, of course, is the only perspective that has any value. Both verses deal with wisdom. The first is a picture of a hunter who catches his prey in spite of its craftiness. The second states the futility of human wisdom. Men's reasoning is useless because men are fallible. For this reason, they need to be renounced.

3:21(a) So then let no one boast in men.

"So then" brings the present discussion to a close. First, Paul exhorts believers not to boast (glory) in men (cf. 1:10-12, 29, 31; 3:4). "To glory in any person or thing is to trust in him or it as the ground of confidence, or as the source of honor or blessedness. It is to regard ourselves as blessed because of our relation to it. Thus men are said to glory on the Lord, or in the cross; because God, or Christ as crucified, is regarded as the ground of confidence, or as the source of blessedness" (Hodge, 61). In light of what has been said about the character of man's wisdom and the weaknesses of men, there is no reason to boast in them.

3:21(b) For all things belong to you,

3:22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you,

3:23 and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

"For" of verse 21 gives the reason they are not to boast, namely, because all things are theirs. Paul, Apollos and Cephas were ministers, servants to God's people. By limiting themselves to one or the other, they were impoverishing themselves by refusing the other gifted men that God had given them.

All things belong to us.

- 1) the world (the physical universe)
- 2) life (for life is in Christ - Jn. 1:2; 5:21, 24)
- 3) death (we don't submit to death, death submits to us because it submitted to Christ and Christ is ours; death has no sting [15:27, 55] and to die is gain [Phil. 1:21];)
- 4) things present, things to come (i.e. everything) also belong to the believer for all things are under Christ's jurisdiction and the believer belongs to Christ

God's people "are no longer the servants of destiny and corruption, but free lords over all things" (Barrett, 96). The believer shall inherit the world (Ro. 4:13). He will reign with Christ (Ro. 8:17). He will share His glory (Jn. 17:22).

The Christian's sovereignty over the world is found in the will of God (Gen. 1:26, 28; Psa. 8:6-9) but can only be achieved in the renewal of sinful humanity in Christ. But when men abandon Christ for the wisdom of the world, they lose claim to the freedoms found in Christ. Christians must not forget that their privileges have great responsibilities, for though all things belong to them, they belong to Christ.

"And Christ belongs to God" is not a statement about Christ's being, but His role in the Father's plan of salvation. In other words, it has to do with Christ being the Savior, not with Him being God. If all things belong to Christ because of His obedience and submission to the Father's will (15:28), and Christ belongs to God, then all boasting should be in Him.