

First Corinthians
Chapter Three
Leon Combs, Ph.D.
Begun July 26, 2007

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

Addressing these people as brethren softens the rebuke that he must make to them. The Greek word for spiritual is “sarkinos”, which means made of flesh. He uses this word to contrast them from being spiritual. When Paul talks about the flesh or the world he is talking about the ethical sense of the people. Christians certainly start out as flesh but they are to grow spiritually after their conversion.

**1Cor 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,
1Cor 3:3 for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?”**

He says here that initially he gave them milk just as a mother gives milk to the newborn infants and not pizza. The human digestive system is not suited for solid food until later in his physical development. Similarly a person who has initially been born again is not yet ready to receive some of the deeper concepts of the spiritual world. But after being converted for some time, the person should be progressing spiritually so as to be ready for deeper spiritual matters. He is contrasting their current spiritual state with their initial spiritual state and he is upset at the lack of progress the people have made. He says that they are still fleshly and he makes that diagnosis based upon their behavior. In verse one he used the Greek word “sarkinos” but now he uses the Greek word “sarkikos”. Sarkinos infers “made of” something like saying the statue is made of stone, but the “ikos” ending means “to be characterized by”. Using the word sarkinos means that the person cannot help but act in some manner but the word sarkikos means that you can help acting in some manner but you act that way in spite of being able to act correctly. These people initially were acting as worldly people because that is all that they were. But after their conversion and the passing of some time they were then able to act spiritually but they were still acting like only worldly people.

After my conversion I could not get enough of spiritual matters as I read the Bible and commentaries about the Bible. I still had occasions of being worldly but my desire was to act more spiritually. These people seemed to have gotten carried away with the worldly influences around them and were acting Corinthian.

1Cor 3:4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men?

1Cor 3:5 What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.

1Cor 3:6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.

1Cor 3:7 So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.

1Cor 3:8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

1Cor 3:9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.”

One of the problems in this group of new Christians was that they were allowing themselves to become splintered in their allegiances. Just as there is no difference among slaves and freemen in the church, there should be no substantial difference among the teachers. Certainly every teacher has different approaches in his teaching but every teacher should be pointing people to Jesus Christ. The teachers receive their rewards from God and each teacher is one of God’s workers. When Paul says “what is Apollos” he is saying that he and Apollos and any of the other teachers are nothing only of themselves. Such teachers are only important because the Holy Spirit is working through them to disciple and teach God’s messages to the world. If the Holy Spirit were to withdraw from them, there would be no spiritual blessings to the people. We must constantly remember that we are merely the instrument God uses to pour out His blessings to the people and God’s teachers must always be pointing people to Jesus Christ. The New American Standard properly translates the Greek words into saying that we are fellow workers with God. So even though we are just the instrument used by God, the thought of us working with God is awesome! The people being taught are God’s field and God’s building. The translation of the Greek in this last part of the last sentence is a bit ambiguous in that the words could mean that the people being taught are both the field and the building or that we are becoming the field and the building. A better meaning is probably that we are becoming the field and the building of God as the next sentence clarifies. The spiritual work that will complete the revealing is done by God, not by the teachers.

1Cor 3:10 “According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it.

1Cor 3:11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

1Cor 3:12 Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

1Cor 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.

1Cor 3:14 If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward.

1Cor 3:15 If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.”

Paul continues his interpretation of the work of God and His fellow workers with his analogy with completing a field for harvest later and of a building. The grace of God given to Paul here refers to the enabling power of God for Paul to be able to develop the field and the building. All of God’s workers are involved in completing the field and the

building but all workers must be very careful how they work. We are not building just any field or just any building. The building we are completing will only develop as directed by the corner stone, which has its meaning clarified in both the Old and the New Testaments:

Psalm 118:22 "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief corner stone."

Matt 21:42 "Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, This became the chief corner stone; This came about from the Lord, And it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

The corner stone is our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul tells us that there are two categories of materials that can be used for the building; the worthless and the valuable. My mother always told me to buy the best that I could afford because the best should keep its value for a long time making the purchase price very favorable in the long run. The "day" in verse 13 is the Day of the Lord or the day when Jesus Christ will return. The fire refers to the passage of a judgment upon our works and such was foretold:

Mal 4:1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch."

It is very important to understand that the fire is a fire of testing and not of purification. There is no way this passage can be used to justify the concept of a purgatory for the imagery is of what we have done on earth while a Christian. In some instances we will have obeyed God and built well and in other times we will have built using our selfish instincts. The child of God has been justified completely by God and such is complete. The fire will not cost the person his salvation but it will reveal how we have built poorly and how we have built well. After our death our works will be judged and we will suffer loss in some yet-to-be-understood manner.

1Cor 3:16 "Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"

1Cor 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."

Paul starts out this section of this letter with a mild rebuke that he uses ten times in this letter but only once elsewhere. It is clear that Paul now is writing to the entire group of people and not just to the teachers in the group. There are two Greek words for temple. One word is hieron that includes all of the temple areas and naos, which denotes the sanctuary or the dwelling place of God. Paul uses the word naos here as he is clearly referring to our bodies as a place where God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, lives. The word naos is singular but the word for you is plural. We will see later in 6:19 that the individual is the temple of God but here he is saying that the entire group of God's children is the temple of God.

Paul then testifies to the extreme seriousness of anyone attacking the temple of God. God will not let any attack on his church go without severe judgment. In the Corinthian church people were attempting to divide the church, which would be an attack on the church structure and Paul is telling them of the seriousness of this sin. Paul then reminds them that they are holy because of the living presence of God within them both individually and collectively.

1Cor 3:18 “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise.

1Cor 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";

1Cor 3:20 and again, "The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless."

1Cor 3:21 So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you,

1Cor 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,

1Cor 3:23 and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.”

It is extremely important for everyone to look realistically at himself. If we begin to think that we are very important or very wise then we are not seeing clearly. To become wise before God we have to destroy all of our thoughts about our self-importance. There was a time when I thought that I was embarking on a path toward great wisdom concerning the understanding of molecules and their interactions. Then I realized the foolishness of such a pursuit and of such knowledge for God created everything and he knows everything so I cannot add anything to His knowledge and my work was really foolishness when compared to the knowledge and wisdom of God. When I pushed away any thoughts of my great understanding of the molecular world I could then begin to study God’s word and He led me into a better understanding of reality. The same road to riches applies to any profession. Paul goes on to say that God knows the thoughts of all men and even the most wise can offer nothing of substance. One day all of the world will burn up and all of the writings of all the people throughout the ages will be gone and only the things of God will have any lasting value. Nobody knows from whence cometh the sentence Paul quotes. Some think that it might be from a missing manuscript but the point is that all thoughts of the wisest men are of no value.

The application here by Paul is to the division within the church regarding the teachings by Paul, Peter, and Apollos. To lift any of them up to greatness is futile in comparison to God. I see the same phenomenon today as people talk about the great wisdom of some person that they heard at a conference or seminar regarding Christian matters. Paul uses the word “kosmos” for the world but he is referring to the ordered physical universe and not in the ethical sense. He says that life in Christ is the only real life and that all things in the present and the future belong to them for their gain. He does not mention the past probably referring to the time before their being born again.

Be sure to observe the cascade in his last sentence: the present, the future, our life, and our death all belong to us, we belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. The cascade

ends with Holy God and, of course, only good is in God so all that can happen to us will bring us good as defined by Him.

Rom 8:28 “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

Surely this is a fitting place to stop in this chapter!

References

1. “The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians”, John MacArthur, Moody Press, 1984.
2. “1 Corinthians”, Leon Morris, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 1985.
3. “1&2 Corinthians”, Charles Hodge, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974.
4. “The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 10, 1 Corinthians”, Regency Reference Library, 1976.