

## 1 Corinthians 3:5 – 17

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

we are servants  
for you

<sup>6</sup> I planted,  
Apollos watered,  
but God was causing the growth.

field: roles

<sup>7</sup> So then neither the one who plants  
nor the one who waters is anything,  
but God who causes the growth.

field: God causes growth

<sup>8</sup> Now he who plants  
and he who waters are one;  
but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

field: rewards

<sup>9</sup> For we are God's fellow workers;  
you are God's field,

we are God's workers  
for you, God's field

God's building.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

I laid a foundation  
others build on it  
Jesus is the foundation

But each man must be careful how he builds on it.

<sup>11</sup> For no man can lay a foundation  
other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

building: roles and materials

<sup>12</sup> Now if any man builds on the foundation  
with gold, silver, precious stones,  
wood, hay, straw,

<sup>13</sup> 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.

building: Jesus will purify by fire

<sup>14</sup> If any man's work which he has built on it remains,  
he will receive a reward.

building: rewards

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

<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are a temple of God  
and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

you (plural) are the temple of God  
Spirit dwells in you

<sup>17</sup> 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.

## Historical and Cultural Background

### *Paul's Argument*

- In Greece, traveling 'Sophists' or philosophers would visit a city, and if they made a good impression, win citizenship, set up a school, and begin receiving male students for a fee. Students would then become devoted to their teachers, imitating their speech, walk, dress, etc. They would also debate students from other schools, engaging in verbal and sometimes physical attacks.
- Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (1:12) were friends and colleagues as leaders in the Jesus movement. Their differences were not theological (if they were, Paul would have taken a different approach). But the Corinthian Christians were arguing about who was more 'powerful' and 'wise' as defined by Greek and Roman culture.

### *Gardening and Building Language*

- Roman construction was everywhere, and was still ongoing. Roman armies had destroyed Greek Corinth in 164 BC because of its leadership role in the rebellion of the Second Achaian League. Julius Caesar started to rebuild Roman Corinth as a colony in 44 BC.
- The Jewish audience would have heard echoes of Amos the prophet, who used the language of both gardening and building when he hoped for the Messiah's coming.

<sup>11</sup> 'In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David  
And wall up its breaches;

I will also raise up its ruins  
And rebuild it as in the days of old;

<sup>12</sup> That they may possess the remnant of Edom  
And all the nations who are called by My name,' declares the LORD who does this.

<sup>13</sup> 'Behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD,  
'When the plowman will overtake the reaper

And the treader of grapes him who sows seed;  
When the mountains will drip sweet wine  
And all the hills will be dissolved.

<sup>14</sup> Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel,  
And they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them;

They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine,  
And make gardens and eat their fruit.

<sup>15</sup> I will also plant them on their land,  
And they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them,'  
Says the LORD your God. (Amos 9:11 – 15)

- The 'temple of God' (1 Cor.3:16 – 17) is a reference to God dwelling within and among His people. It is a pattern that started with Eden, when God walked with Adam and Eve (Gen.2:4 – 25). God partially restored that relationship during the time of Moses when He came to dwell in the tabernacle (Ex.34 – 40). Then, God dwelled in the Jerusalem temple (1 Ki.8:10 – 11), which was a more concrete form. After the Babylonian Empire destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC, God's presence did not return to the temple. Jesus said he was the true temple of God (Jn.2:12 – 25; 14:1 – 17:24).

## Questions

1. How important is reconciliation and right relationships in the body of Christ? Recall what you've studied so far, and what you know from elsewhere.
2. What does the metaphor of gardening or farming (3:5 – 9) add to Paul's argument?
  - a. Different roles for workers in the garden
  - b. God's role: God causes growth
  - c. An attractive, organic picture
  - d. Practical lesson: Accepting that I have a role to play, and so do others. It's not a one man or one woman show.
  - e. Discuss: Which is it harder for you to accept: that *you* have a role? Or that *others* have a role?
  - f. Illus: When I was in college, I helped a friend named Irene come to faith, with the help of another friend named Rachel, and others. Rachel was in a different Christian fellowship, but we valued each other as partners in reaching out to Irene.
  - g. Leader: Think of a time when you partnered with another Christian, perhaps of another group, church, or denomination, to serve another/others.
3. What does the metaphor of building (3:10 – 17) add to Paul's argument?
  - a. It would resonate well with the Corinthians, whether Greek, Roman, or Jewish. Though for different reasons.
  - b. The importance of the foundation: The foundation is either the foundation stone against which all other stones are cut, or a strong supporting level on the ground. We don't have enough data to say what Paul had in mind, exactly, but either case serves the argument.
    - i. Illus: My colleague Jennifer lives in a house at 20 Banks Street in Cambridge. At some point, someone built a bedroom that extends beyond the foundation of the house. The floor of that room now slopes downward!
    - ii. Why does Paul say he is a wise master builder? Because he was the first to preach in Corinth and therefore lay the foundation of Christ in Corinth.
    - iii. He is endorsing, not criticizing, the work of Apollos in v.12 when he says, 'If any man builds on the foundation...' But he is letting them and us know that it really does matter if we build according to the foundation or not.
  - c. The importance of using good materials: Some materials will last through a fire. Others will just be burned up.
    - i. See Appendix A, below, to see the pattern of fire in Scripture
    - ii. I don't think we are supposed to 'read into' what gold is, what silver is, what hay is, etc. It's just a metaphor about how the builder's work will be shown for what it is.
  - d. The investment of the builder(s) and the rewarding of the builder: Anything that is built well will be validated by Jesus when he returns. Anything that is not built well will be burned away.
    - i. Illus: If I lead a church or fellowship because I want to be important (or financially taken care of!), ultimately Jesus will call everyone's attention to himself. That is reality. So if that is/was my motivation, I will have everything ripped from my hands; all the loyalties I built for myself will be properly redirected. But if my motivation all along was to win praise for Jesus, and to direct people to Jesus, then I will be rewarded!!
    - ii. The reward of ministry is intrinsic, not extrinsic. It is internal to the person, not external to the person. I don't think Jesus will whip out some golden coins for his eternal economy, and give me a few. Instead, what I have sought will become reality, and I will be rewarded.
    - iii. Illus: I was the leader of our branch of our house church, The Gathering. There were a few Haitian people who were coming to our service. My wife Ming and I decided to invite people to consider folding ourselves into another church, Rescued, which had opened its doors in September 2013. Why? Because I didn't know how to reach out effectively to Haitians. I didn't know Creole. I didn't know the experience of Haitian Americans. I didn't have time to learn all that. And I didn't want to train people in The Gathering into my areas of incompetence. That would not have been faithful to the Great Commission. So I gave up my place as a leader in The Gathering, to become an attender at Rescued. And guess what? We were able to invite lots of our neighbors to Rescued, and the two Haitian American teenagers loved it. One already called himself a Christian. The other gave her life to Jesus!!

- e. The purpose of the building: To be the temple dwelling place of God!! This is firmly from the Jewish perspective. It refers not to a pagan temple, but to the one dwelling place of God when He once lived among the Israelites.
    - i. This is one building for God. This is not one building for each person. It is not an individualistic thing.
    - ii. Illus: Building a house for someone else, in New Orleans. One year, during one of our spring break trips, we got to be part of a key-granting ceremony to the partner families. Habitat for Humanity and the partner families work together to build the houses. In this case, it was in the Musician's Village in the Upper Ninth Ward in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The other musicians came out and played jazz music, and we danced in the street! It was really motivating. We went back to the house we were working on. Our hammering of nails on wood, and putting up siding, and roofing, was filled with more diligent cooperation with each other. That's what it's like to work with love on someone else's house. In this case, of course, we are both the builders and the building! We are part of the wonderful community that God desires to live within.
  - f. Destroying the Temple? Destroying the person?
    - i. Is this rhetorical? Or is it actual? Is it referring to political rulers who seek to destroy the church and its unity? Or is this referring to people who consciously lead factions and conflicts within the church? It's not clear to me.
4. What is the church from your perspective, and what is the church from God's perspective?
- a. For many of us, the church is 'our community,' about 10 – 20 people with whom we feel comfortable. But what happens when we look at the church from God's perspective, not just ours?
  - b. Why is the church so important to God? For God, the church is *His house*. It is the place in which He hosts His guests, new people. It is the place from which He shines His love and life! The tie in to Amos: This is what God prioritizes! It is the enfolding of Jews and Gentiles under the reign of the king from David's line. That turns out to be Jesus. In Jesus, God redeems human beings, heals and transforms us, and makes us one with Him in deeper and deeper ways.
  - c. Application: Which building are you building the most? The Corinthians have a choice between God rebuilding the relationships of the church vs. Rome rebuilding the city of Corinth (or for example, the U.S. or capitalist corporations building stuff everywhere). Those aren't completely opposite things to each other, but there is a question of which one will win over the other, and which will shape the other.
  - d. Illus: When I went to the Dominican Republic and Haiti in the summer of 2014, I went to learn from the church there, and contribute to it in some small way. We taught English and Spanish in Haitian schools, including restavec children who were or are child slaves in some sense. We also went to a border town and built latrines for a rural community. I wound up writing a poem called *Sweat* while I was there, reflecting on that experience.  
<http://nagasawafamily.org/hispaniola1406.poem.htm>
  - e. Leader: Share a story about how you have invested in the mission of Jesus, or the community of Jesus. What difference did that make?
5. (if there is 15 minutes more, and momentum) How important is ministry to you?
- a. Application: How can we make room in our life for gardening or building with Jesus?
    - i. Grabbing lunch or coffee with someone intentionally once a week
  - b. If you haven't done so already, read the character sketch on Paul in the introduction section of the 1 Corinthians booklet. Ask the group these questions...
    - i. What do you think about Paul's passion? His suffering?
    - ii. What kind of conflict is Paul anticipating? Primarily, conflict with his fellow Jews.
    - iii. How might we see ourselves in this movement that Jesus started? What kinds of challenges might we expect? What kinds of joys?

### Appendix A: Fire as a Literary Theme in Scripture

Notice that in Scripture, God uses the symbol of fire as a refining thing before it becomes a destroying thing. Whether we experience it as refining or destroying depends on us. Do we want to get rid of our impurity? Or identify ourselves with it?

#### Pentateuch:

1. Guarding the way to the tree of life is a flaming sword (Gen.3:24), symbolizing the word of God (Rev.1:16, etc.) which can cut/'circumcise' uncleanness away
2. God as fire in the burning thorn bush (Ex.3:2; Acts 7:30)
3. God as fire on Mount Sinai inviting Israel higher up and further in (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5)
4. See also Hebrews 12:18 – 29, where the writer says that we come not to the fiery Mt. Sinai, but to a new Mt. Zion after having been cleansed and perfected through Jesus, 'for our God is a consuming fire.'

#### Isaiah:

1. 'When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, then the LORD will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy.' (Isa.4:4 – 5)
2. Isaiah's unclean lips are cleansed with a fiery, burning coal (Isa.6:6)
3. Fire becomes destroying for those who want to hold onto their impurity (Isa.29:6; 30:27 – 30; 66:1 – 24 which is also connected to the theme of renewal of God's presence on Mt. Zion, a retelling of Sinai)

#### Malachi:

1. 'For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness.' (Mal.3:2 – 3)

#### Matthew

1. 'The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:10 – 12)
2. Positively: 'You are the light of the world... nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.' (Mt.5:14 – 16)
3. Negatively: 'Whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.' (Mt.5:22, etc.)

#### Luke – Acts

1. John the Baptist speaks of the fire of the Holy Spirit (refinement) or wood-burning (destruction) (Lk.3:9 – 18)
2. At Pentecost, the Spirit comes with 'tongues of fire' (Acts 2:1 – 3), which symbolically makes each believer a mini Mt. Sinai, since Pentecost commemorates the giving of the Sinai Law

#### Revelation

1. 'His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace' (Rev.1:14 – 15; 2:18)
2. 'I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.' (Rev.3:18)
3. Fire is destroying for those who cling to impurity: 'tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb' (Rev.14:10)
4. 'And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.' (Rev.20:12 – 15)

See also my message *Hell as the Love of God*, and the powerpoint slides: <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-hell-as-the-love-of-god.pdf>, and <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-hell-as-the-love-of-god-ppts.pdf>.