

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Chapter 3

On Divisions in the Church

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? 4 For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human? 5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. 10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. 11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. 16 Do you not know that you[c] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. 18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” 20 and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.” 21 So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, 23 and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

3:1 *people of the flesh.* The Corinthians behaved like the “natural person,” not like believers. (TLSB)

σαρκικός means “having the nature and characteristics of flesh” as manifested in one’s attitudes and behavior according to Winter, “σάρκιος is best seen in this context as an explication of σάρκιος and an antonym of πνευματικός. Paul is searching for words to show the immaturity of their outlook.” (CC)

3:2 *milk, not solid food.* The simple message of Christ crucified (2:2). *solid food.* The great depth of spiritual insight that builds upon Christ. *not ready.* See Heb 6:1. Spiritual growth, like physical growth, takes time. (TLSB)

As their spiritual father (4:15), Paul had fed these babies in Christ milk, not solid food (cf. Heb 5:12–14; 1 Pet 2:2). That was appropriate as long as they were still beginners in the faith. But milk should not remain the regular diet for those beyond infancy. Some four or five years had elapsed since Paul first planted the church in Corinth. By now they should have developed the capacity for solid food. There is a strong reproach in the words: “But you are not yet able even now” (3:2). Paul calls them to spiritual maturity. (CC p. 108)

3:3 *you are of the flesh*. Like men of the world instead of men of God. They were following merely human standards. (CSB)

As they had not reached maturity, the spiritual outlook had not yet permeated the Corinthians' thinking, which helps to explain many of the difficulties experienced in their community. *jealousy and strife*. Markers of immaturity (cf 1:11). *in a human way?* As a natural, fallen person. (TLSB)

3:4 *I follow Paul ... Apollos*. Paul presses his point home by reminding the Corinthians of what he had heard from Chloe's people: one person was saying, "I myself belong to Paul"; another, "I belong to Apollos" (3:4; cf. 1:12). Such self-assertion over against one another was a sure sign that the Corinthians were conducting themselves like Spirit-less human beings. As he would later write to them in 2 Corinthians: "When [people] measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense" (2 Cor 10:12 NRSV) (CC p. 108-109)

It is noteworthy that now Paul only mentions two of the four factions he described in 1:12; the "Cephas" and "Christ" factions have dropped from view. Probably the "Paul" and "Apollos" parties were the largest and most vocal. (CC p. 109)

3:5 *through whom you believed* – Faith comes through hearing the Word (Rm 10:14, 17). (TLSB)

ἐπιστεύσατε—The aorist tense harks back to their conversion. They "came to faith" when they heard the Gospel and were baptized (1:13–17). (CC p. 110)

Apollos and Paul are simply servants of Christ and his people (3:22; 4:1). Their ministry is modeled on that of Jesus, who came not to lord it over others but to wait on them, not to be served but to serve (Mk 10:41–45; Lk 22:25–27). Through the ministry of Paul and Apollos the Corinthians had come to faith Paul carefully chooses his words in 3:5: "*through* whom [δι' ὧν] you came to faith/believed," not "*in* whom you believed." In other words, the missionaries were merely instruments through whom God had called the Corinthians to faith. They were not to become objects of faith. (CC pp. 111-112)

assigned to each – Each worker is assigned a different sphere, perhaps geographically or perhaps by type of service. Each service is equally important, a theme taken up in ch 12. (TLSB)

Apollos and Paul were totally dependent on their Lord. Without him they could have accomplished nothing (Jn 15:5). Thus he alone, "the Great Master," could properly claim the Corinthians' faith and allegiance. He had assigned Apollos and Paul their respective roles in Corinth, and it was under his oversight and by his gracious provision ("as the Lord assigned to each," 1 Cor 3:5) that their labors had led to the establishment of the church. (CC p. 112)

3:6 *I planted*. See Ac 18:4–11. Paul's work was of a pioneer nature, preaching where no one had ever preached before. (CSB)

Sowed the Word. (TLSB)

Apollos watered. See Ac 18:24–28. Apollos worked in the established church, edifying the converts Paul had won. (CSB)

Nurtured the faith. (TLSB)

God gave the growth – By the Spirit's power through the Word proclaimed by the apostles. (TLSB)

Because it is God who keeps giving the growth, “neither the planter is anything nor the waterer, but only God, who does the growing” (3:7). Back in 3:5, Paul had asked: “What, after all, is Apollos? What is Paul?” Now he answers, saying in essence, “We are nothing!” (cf. 2 Cor 12:11; Gal 6:3). Paul was keenly aware that the church lived totally by the grace of God, each church worker being totally dependent on God for any fruit in his ministry. What Luther wrote on the day before his death applies to all ministers of the Gospel: “We are beggars. That is true.” All glory for a fruitful ministry must be given to God alone. Whereas Paul and Apollos are nothing, God is everything. To emphasize this, Paul places “God,” θεός, last in 3:7. (CC p. 113)

3:7 *is anything* – Those privileged to share in this ministry may regard themselves as the world regards the Church, as nobodies (cf 1:28). “For without His grace, and if He does not grant the increase, our willing and running, our planting, sowing, and watering (1 Corinthians 3:5–7)—are all nothing” (FC Ep II 6). (TLSB)

But while Paul and Apollos are “nothing,” they are “one thing” in a vitally important ministry that will be rewarded by God. (CC p. 113)

God has chosen to grow his church from the seed planted and watered by servants called to a single task. Anyone who watches a gardener or farmer at work sees that planting and watering serve a common goal. Thus Apollos and Paul did not work independently of each other; they formed a harmonious unit, one in purpose, one in fellowship (Gal 2:9). (CC p. 113)

3:8 *are one* – Equal and united. (TLSB)

will receive his wages – The reward for faithful service, not implying that one can earn salvation. God’s favor is unmerited (e.g., Eph 2:8). The joy of success in Christ surpasses any payment. “We teach that rewards have been offered and promised for the works of believers. We teach that good works have merit, not for forgiveness of sins, for grace, or for justification (for these we receive only through faith), but for other rewards, bodily and spiritual, in this life and after this life” (Ap V 73). (TLSB)

Moreover, what matters most is not how much the Corinthians make of Paul or Apollos, but how God assesses their work. Again Paul is emphasizing that he and Apollos are servants, working for a master who will allot each of them his pay (“reward”) in keeping with his productivity (“work,” 3:8). (CC p. 113)

3:9 *God’s fellow workers* – As part of God’s team, they participate in His work. (TLSB)

God’s field. The people are God’s farm. (CSB)

God’s building. They are also depicted as God’s temple (vv. 16–17). He owns the farm and the building where both Paul and Apollos worked. (CSB)

Common NT depictions of the Church (e.g., Mt 13:24–33; 1Pt 2:5). Both projects call for laborers. (TLSB)

3:10 *grace of God given to me* – Greek *charis*, generally means “God’s favor,” but here Paul refers to God’s gift of strength or ability for service. See “gifts,” p 1902. *given to me.* Paul begins to describe his own work (cf 15:10). (TLSB)

A competent craftsman apprenticed in his trade. (TLSB)

I laid a foundation. By preaching Christ and Him crucified (2:2). (CSB)

The preaching of Christ (2:2; 3:11). (TLSB)

All is of God. The genitive “of God” (τοῦ θεοῦ) in 3:10 echoes the three possessive genitives of the previous verse (3:9). Paul never forgets that he owes everything to God, even though he is about to speak of his own contribution in building up the church. It was by the grace and mercy of God that he, “the least of the apostles” (1 Cor 15:9), had initially been called to the priestly service of the Gospel (Rom 15:15–16; Eph 3:8). By that same grace he had labored in Corinth (1 Cor 15:10), where he says, “as a wise master builder I laid a foundation” (3:10). God had supplied him with the wisdom of Christ crucified, which is foolishness to the world but is wiser than any worldly wisdom (1:18–25). This wisdom he passed on to the Corinthians (2:6–7)—the basic tenets of the Gospel of Christ crucified (15:1–4)—and thus Paul laid the church’s foundation. This was consistent with his ambition to preach the Gospel only in places where Christ had not already been named, lest he build on another’s foundation (Rom 15:20). (CC pp. 116-117)

skilled master – σοφός—NIV translates σοφός as “expert,” which is accurate and appropriate in describing a builder. However, “wise” reveals the link to the wisdom (σοφία) Paul described in 1:18–25; 2:6–7, the divine wisdom of the apostolic word of the cross. (CC p. 115)

builder – A competent craftsman apprenticed in his trade. (TLSB)

someone else. Apollos. (CSB)

Apollos (v 6). Some who “built” at Corinth did so inappropriately, undoing Paul’s foundation (e.g., the “super-apostles,” 2Co 11:5). (TLSB)

With the foundation in place, “another builds on it” (1 Cor 3:10). Paul seems to be reflecting on his general practice as a master builder, and on how that is being played out in Corinth. He lays the foundation, then another—a preacher he has appointed (Acts 14:23)—continues the building. The word “another” followed by the present tense “builds” (1 Cor 3:10) is sufficiently general to include Apollos as the one who had originally watered the church but also (since Apollos was not at present in Corinth, 16:12) whoever was currently engaged in ministering to the people. (CC p. 117)

take care – To all current and future builders of the Corinthian church, Paul adds the warning: “Let each one watch how he builds on [it]” (3:10). The builders need to watch out to ensure two things: (1) that they do not lay a different foundation, but build on the one already in place (3:11); (2) that they use only precious and enduring materials (3:12–15). (CC p. 117)

3:11 *foundation other than that* – After the slab for a house has been poured, it would be ridiculous for the builders to ignore it and proceed to pour another slab beside it. Paul had laid the foundation for the Corinthian church by preaching “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2). No doctrine was to be preached in Corinth that did not have this Gospel as its base (cf. 15:1–4; Gal 1:6–9). (CC p. 117)

All teaching and practice is to be in harmony with what the founding father has put in place. (CC p. 117)

3:12 Some materials are less durable than others, yet each contribution has its part (e.g., straw may be more appropriate than stone for a roof). “The ‘foundation’ is the true knowledge of Christ and faith. There are also many weak persons, who build upon the foundation stubble that will perish (v 12), holding certain harmful opinions. Nevertheless, because the weak do not overthrow the foundation, they are both

forgiven and corrected. The writings of the Holy Fathers declare that sometimes even they built stubble upon the foundation, but that this did not overthrow their faith” (Ap VII and VIII 20–21). (TLSB)

gold, silver, costly stones. Precious, durable work that stands the test of divine judgment; symbolic of pure Christian doctrine and living. (CSB)

wood, hay or straw. Worthless work that will not stand the test; symbolic of weak, insipid teaching and life. (CSB)

Every minister is responsible for the quality of the materials he uses in building the superstructure. The materials listed, “gold, silver, precious stones, woods, hay, straw” (1 Cor 3:12) are arranged in descending order of value. But more importantly, they fall into two groups of three. Gold, silver, and precious stones clearly possess greater value than the items in the second group. In addition (and this is most important in the context), these three more valuable items are noncombustible, whereas the materials in the second group are all combustible. (CC p. 118)

3:13 *the Day.* On Judgment Day, all people will be called to account for their work. (TLSB)

ἡ ... ἡμέρα—This is the shortest of many expressions from the OT for “the day of the Lord,” that great day of his final coming. Paul uses the expression “that day” in 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8 and simply “the Day” also in 1 Thess 5:4, which echoes OT usage, for example, Mal 4:1 (Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Old Testament 3:19). (CC p. 115)

The quality of each minister’s work “will become evident” in due course, “for the Day will make it evident” (3:13). It is accordingly premature for the Corinthians to play off one pastor against another (1:10–12; cf. 4:5). The only evaluation that counts is what will happen in the light of “the Day.” The Day is Judgment Day, known in both the OT and NT as “the day of the Lord” (Joel 1:15; Amos 5:18–20; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2) and in the NT more fully as “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (CC p. 118)

fire. God’s judgment. The work of some believers will stand the test while that of others will disappear—emphasizing the importance of teaching the pure word of God. (CSB)

Fire is a means of purification. As in 1Pt 1:7, “fire” will demonstrate faithfulness. Christians understood persecution as a purifying and testing ordeal (cf 1Pt 4:12). (TLSB)

3:14 *survives...a reward* – The same word is translated “wages” in v 8. (TLSB)

3:15 *loss.* Of reward (v. 14). (CSB)

ζημιωθήσεται—ζημιόω is a commercial term meaning to “*suffer damage or loss, forfeit, sustain injury.*” Its opposite is κερδαίνω, “to gain, make a profit.” See Phil 3:7–9 for Paul’s description of how all his “gain” from his Pharisaic heritage he now considers “loss” for the sake of Christ; see also 1 Cor 9:19–22 for Paul’s desire to “gain” others for Christ. For him and his fellow ministers of the Gospel it would be to their profit (their “crown of boasting,” 1 Thess 2:19) to see their ministerial work endure, but a loss to see it consumed by fire. (CC p. 116)

himself will be saved – The person will be saved through faith in Christ, not because of work in building His Church. (TLSB)

as through the fire. Perhaps a Greek proverbial phrase, meaning “by a narrow escape,” with one’s work burned up by the fire of God’s pure justice and judgment. (CSB)

οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός— “*He will be saved, (but only) in such a way as (a man, in an attempt to save himself, must go) through the fire (and therefore suffers fr[om] burns).*” That the man suffers burns is an interesting suggestion which may be an implication of the text. The text itself, however, speaks only of the burning of his work. (CC p. 116)

3:16 *do you not know* – Implies that the Corinthians should know. (TLSB)

God’s temple. God’s church. Paul does not mean here that each of his readers is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He says, “You yourselves (plural) are God’s temple (singular).” In 6:19 he speaks of each Christian as a temple of the Holy Spirit. (CSB)

The congregation. *God’s temple.* In the OT, the temple was established as God’s place among His people; in the NT, such a building is redundant because “God’s Spirit dwells in you” as God has promised. (TLSB)

3:17 *God will destroy him.* Strong language, indicating that such a foolish laborer is not one of the Lord’s true servants. This is in contrast to the thought of v. 15, where the faulty Christian worker is saved, but his work is destroyed (he suffers loss of reward). In the context of chs. 1–4 Paul here refers to people who tear the local church apart by factions and quarrels (1:11–12). (CSB)

To destroy the “temple” is to destroy God’s Church or its individual members who share the Spirit. (TLSB)

φθείρει—φθείρω, “*destroy in the sense ‘punish w[ith] eternal destruction’ 1 Cor 3:17b (= ‘punish by destroying’ as Jer 13:9).*” (CC p. 116)

holy. Holy, set apart for God’s use and glory; so do not desecrate the church by breaking it up into various factions. (CSB)

Because God dwells there. “In the elect (who are justified by Christ and reconciled with God), God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (who is the eternal and essential righteousness) dwells by faith” (FC SD III 54). (TLSB)

Thus anyone tearing apart the fabric of the church is no better than the Babylonians who burned the Solomonic temple and the Seleucids who defiled the second temple and its worship and thereby assaulted the God of Israel. 1 Cor 3:17 is Paul’s solemn warning not only to the Corinthians but to the church of all ages that “if anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.” The statement is entirely general, applying to anyone who would destroy the church by whatever means—false teaching or destructive practices. With respect to his immediate audience in Corinth, Paul’s warning applies especially to anyone who foments factions by his boasting in human beings and their wisdom (1:10–17; 3:21). The punishment will fit the crime: “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him” (3:17). God will condemn him to eternal destruction. (CC p. 122)

3:18 *wise in this age* – By worldly standards (cf 1:20). (TLSB)

become a “fool.” Turn away from human wisdom (from being “wise by the standards of this age”). Cf. 1:18. (CSB)

By trusting God's way. (TLSB)

become wise. Cf. 1:21, 24. (CSB)

3:19-20 *wisdom ... folly.* In Jb 5:13, the lowly are exalted (cf 1Co 1:18–25). Cf Ps 94:8–11. (TLSB)

3:21 *in men.* About being some man's disciple (see 1:12; 3:4; cf. 1:31; 4:6). (CSB)

Dividing the congregation by loyalty to a particular leader. (TLSB)

ἐν ἀνθρώποις—Paul speaks of natural, fallen “human beings” in the same way that he used ἄνθρωπος in 3:3–4 (see the textual note on πνευματικοῖς ... in 3:1–4). (CC p. 123)

Paul has already declared that the Christian should only boast in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31). Now he states the same truth negatively: since Scripture (Job 5:13 and Ps 94:11, quoted in 1 Cor 3:19–20) shows the futility of human craftiness and scheming, “let no one continue to boast in human beings” (3:21). Not only is such boasting misdirected, but as Paul goes on to explain, it greatly limits the Christian's horizons. Anyone who thinks he is beholden solely to one particular teacher of the faith is in danger of cutting himself off from the spiritual wisdom others may have to offer. Rather than enriching himself, he is impoverishing himself, missing out on the opportunity to benefit from other faithful pastors and teachers. Paul is, of course, speaking of other leaders who are indeed faithful to the Gospel; he names Apollos and Cephas and would not name others who might be compromising or distorting the Gospel. (CC p. 125)

All things are yours. All these Christian leaders belong to the whole church. No group can call one leader its very own (see vv. 22–23). (CSB)

Paul explains, “all things are yours” (3:21). The apostle may be citing a favorite slogan of the spiritual elite in the Corinthian church who had been influenced by Stoic philosophy. The Stoics prided themselves on being “a principal work, a fragment of God himself.” As rational creatures, with the divine spark dwelling in them, they claimed to have the ability to realize God's providence and give him due thanks for all his gifts. (CC p. 125)

Some of the “wise” in Corinth may have thought this Stoic posture, “all things are ours,” was compatible with their new faith. But Paul uses the slogan to turn the tables on the “wise”: “If your slogan is true, then you should no longer be boasting in any human leader. Rather, if ‘all things are yours,’ then you should be expanding your horizons to admit that Paul *and* Apollos *and* Cephas are yours. These men are all your servants on behalf of the same God (cf. 3:5), not leaders of narrow factions. They all proclaim the same Gospel, not different gospels. (CC p. 126)

3:22 *all are yours* – The Corinthians should benefit from all of God's servants, rather than being exclusively devoted to one. Cf Rm 8:32; see “heir,” “In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul makes ministers equal. He also teaches that the Church is superior to <or: more than> the ministers. Superiority or lordship over the Church or the rest of the ministers is not attributed to Peter” (Tr 11). (TLSB)

3:23 *you are Christ's.* You are united with and belong to Christ. (CSB)

Through Baptism in His name (6:11, 14–15, 19–20). (TLSB)

Christ is God's. Christ is in union with God the Father (Jn 10:30) and with God the Holy Spirit (2Co 13:14). Similarly, Christians are in union with the church's true leaders (v. 22) and with Christ (v. 23), who in turn is in union with the other members of the Trinity. (CSB)

Our life, inheritance, and authority have their source in Jesus, who has His source in the Father from eternity. Cf 15:24–28. (TLSB)

Ch 3 There is no ground for pride in human achievement in Christ’s Church. Such an attitude undermines the very nature of His gifts of salvation and service. God accomplishes everything, living in us by His Spirit. • “O Holy Spirit, enter in, and in our hearts Your work begin, Your dwelling place now make us.” Amen. (*LSB* 913:1) (TLSB)