



COMMENTARIES ON "1 CORINTHIANS"

Chapter 3

The Holy Apostle begins chapter three by continuing his message about spiritual immaturity (see 1 Corinthians 2:6), this time accusing the Corinthian Christians themselves of being "babes in Christ" (3:1, 2). St. Paul was unable to teach the Corinthians some of the deep things about Christianity - which he describes as "solid food" - when he first visited them because they were too new in their faith to understand such teaching. Unfortunately, the Corinthians are still unable to receive such teaching because they are "carnal," meaning they were still controlled by what he elsewhere calls the "works of the flesh" (see Galatians 5:16-24). He notes their particular problems, pointing out their divisive tendencies toward envy, strife and divisions (1 Corinthians 3:3). To claim that they follow one apostle or evangelist over another, and then to believe themselves superior for doing so, is nothing more than "carnal," sinful behavior (3:4).

Notice what St. Paul says about himself and Apollos: they are ministers directed by the Lord, no more and no less (3:5). He then attributes all success in evangelism and spiritual growth to God by using an agricultural metaphor, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives increase." Ambrosiaster explains this metaphor, "To plant is to evangelize and to bring to faith, to water is to baptize with the approved form of words. To forgive sins, however, and to give the Spirit belongs to God alone." Because this work is through God's strength (Philippians 4:13), the workers are united (1 Corinthians 3:8). Nonetheless, pay attention to what St. Paul says in verse nine: "We are God's fellow workers." Just think of the dignity this gives to each Christian who serves God, as Theodore of Mopsuestia notes, "Paul calls us God's fellow workers, not his servants or slaves."

St. Paul further makes his point by using the metaphor of a building: each Christian is God's building (3:9). St. Paul himself, an apostle, is a master builder (3:10), and lays the foundation that is Jesus Christ (3:11). Anyone who builds on this holy foundation, whatever the materials used - gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - will have that building tested by God, and will be either rewarded or not (even though the builder will be painfully saved) (3:12-15). This is a complicated metaphor: Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Christian life, and a Christian teacher simply builds up individual Christians upon this foundation. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains that there are two types of materials from which Christians are built: "The gold, silver, and precious stones of unity, love, and loyalty to Christ," and "the wood, hay, and straw of personality cult and disunity." On the Day of Judgement - which St. Paul describes as a fire - the material from which the individual Christian was built will then be revealed. Christian teachers who built with unity and love will be rewarded, while those who built with disunity will suffer greatly (although ultimately being saved).

What type of building are you? You are the holy temple of God (3:16, 17)! In fact, the Spirit of God dwells in you! This is why St. Paul criticizes divisiveness so strongly, and why it will merit such punishment on the Day of Judgement: because it defiles the temple of God.

After this, St. Paul again returns to the subject of spiritual wisdom. While in the first two chapters St. Paul observed that those who adhere to human wisdom believe the wisdom of God to be foolishness (1:18; 2:14), in this chapter he points to the full truth: the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God (3:19). Quoting Psalm 94:11, St. Paul states that the Lord knows the futility of so-called wise thoughts (3:20), and - quoting Job 5:13 - even claims that the Lord catches the wise in their own craftiness. God does this, St. John Chrysostom teaches, "By showing them that while they imagined they can do without God, just then they would have all the more need of Him. They are reduced to such a strait as to appear inferior to fishers and illiterates, whose wisdom they cannot now do without."

Ultimately, there is no need to esteem one apostle over others, because all things belong to Christians in Christ. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains:

Everything belongs to them: all the apostles are for their upbuilding and progress in the Faith; all the world, with its vast wealth and beauty, all the experiences of life, the experience even of death, everything in this age and the coming age too - all is given to work together for their salvation.