

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Church and the World: 1 Corinthians 3 and 4

Paul's two letters to the Corinthian church occupy a particularly important place in the New Testament. The New Testament begins, and rightly so, with the four Gospels which present the facts of Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. Without Him, there would be no Gospel, no good news for guilty sinners! The Gospels are followed by *The Acts of the Apostles*, which tells of the birth and growth of the infant Christian Church. That completes the historical part of the New Testament.

Acts is followed by *Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. The placing of that letter is important because it deals with the vital question of how guilty sinners can be made right with God. The answer is given: "Therefore, having been justified (made right) by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). The letter to the Romans is followed by the two Corinthian letters of Paul. You see, having been made right with God through faith in Christ, the natural response of every Christian should be to meet together with other Christians in the church to worship God. The Corinthian letters deal with some of the early problems that arose in the church at Corinth. As we shall see, some of those problems are still with us today. These letters, then, provide valuable direction for us today.

That the apostle Paul should choose, out of all the churches established by him, to write these letters to the Corinthian church is also very significant. Paul describes the wickedness of the people of Corinth: "...fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, sodomites, thieves, covetous, drunkards..." He then goes on to say, "And such were some of you. But you were washed...justified in the name of the Lord Jesus" (6:9-11). Indeed, the wickedness of the people of Corinth was proverbial in the ancient world, which had coined the expression 'to Corinthianise' to describe such behaviour. But God had placed such in His church!

That has to be good news for us today. The Father is still seeking worshippers, as the Lord Jesus reminded the woman at Sychar's well. But Jesus went on to say to her, "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-24). Today, we need to take note of the directions God has given through His servant, Paul, for worship in the church. Some of the things Paul writes in these letters may seem hard to our modern thinking. We do need to appreciate that Paul wrote to these Corinthian Christians out of a deep sense of love for them: "...as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel" (4:14,15). Paul desired only the best for his children in the faith at Corinth. His letters still challenge us with that best today!

This morning, we are going to look at 1 Corinthians 3 and 4. Within the time available, we will be able only to look at a brief outline of each chapter. Chapter 3 contains three commandments for us to obey. It can be divided as follows:

Verses 1-4: Grow up!

Verses 5-17: Build up!

Verses 18-23: Wake up!

Grow up!

The Bible uses three important words to characterise man:

Natural man in his unconverted state. Paul reminds us: "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned (or 'understood')" (2:14).

spiritual man enlightened and controlled by the Spirit of God. At conversion, each believer receives God's gift of His indwelling Holy Spirit and becomes a spiritual man. So Paul writes, "We have the mind of Christ" (2:16). We would never have dared to make such an astounding claim if God had not first declared it in His word! Because of the indwelling Holy Spirit, each believer has the capacity to think and act like Christ! Yet so often we have to pray,

*May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.*

carnal this describes the state of those who, possessing the Holy Spirit, are still controlled by the flesh, our original sinful nature.

Paul, with Silas and Timothy, had spent some eighteen months in Corinth, “teaching the word of God among them” (see Acts 18:11). As a result, a large church was established there. Paul had reminded them earlier, “You come short in no gift” (1:7). But now, some 2 or 3 years later, Paul has to mourn the fact that they are still spiritual babes. They had not grown in their Christian faith! A children’s chorus reminds us:

*Read your Bible, pray every day,
And you’ll grow, grow, grow.*

Peter tells us that our appetite for the word of God needs to be as keen as that of a new-born babe for milk, “that you may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2). But, through prayer and reading God’s word, we do need to grow in our knowledge of Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Later in this epistle, Paul challenges us all to be mature Christians (14:20). If Paul were writing to us today, how would he describe us?

One sad consequence of the carnal condition of the Corinthians was that they were divided, lining themselves up behind party leaders. The sorry state of Christendom today, with its many denominations, shows that we have failed to learn the lessons Paul would teach the Corinthians. We need to grow up!

Build up

Paul and Apollos had worked well together in the past. It is unlikely that they would have had any part in these divisions. Paul uses their names simply as examples to save embarrassing others. He points out the sadness and the folly of competition in Christian fellowship: “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase” (3:5-7).

Far from being in competition with Apollos, Paul can describe themselves as fellow-workers for God. He sees their work in Corinth as working in God’s field, to produce fruit for God, and working in God’s building, bringing about a dwelling place of God. In all this work, God is seen as the Master Gardener, the supreme Architect, working through His servants, who must work according to His plans laid down in Scripture. The church as the dwelling place of God is an important theme in the New Testament. It always refers to a company of God’s people, never to a literal building, however humble or magnificent.

The thought of building moves Paul on to warn that each one needs to take heed *how* he builds (verse 10). The foundation of the Church can only be Christ. So, speaking of Himself, the Lord told Peter, “On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). As the well-known hymn puts it:

*The Church’s one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord.*

Paul describes the church in Ephesians as “...saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (2:19,20). Here, he is referring to the foundational teaching of the apostles and of the New Testament prophets, those who, through the Holy Spirit, brought the word of God for a particular occasion. But just as the cornerstone is the most important part of a building (it gives direction and character to the remainder of the building stones), so Christ is the most important member of His church – its true foundation.

Every Christian should be involved in building up the Church of Christ. But Paul warns us that, in this work, there are different kinds of materials – gold, silver and precious stones which will stand the test of fire; and wood, hay and straw which will be burned by the fire (verses 12-15). It is important to notice in this picture that Paul is describing *acts* of Christian service, not Christians themselves. Gold, silver and precious stones describes work done in obedience to Christ and for His glory alone. Wood, hay and stubble describes that kind of building that is not according to the mind of Christ.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul reminds us, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (5:10). Note that here again

it is *acts* of Christian service that is the subject here, and not Christians themselves. The Lord's promise is crystal clear: "Most assuredly, I say unto you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, *and shall not come into judgment*, but has passed from death unto life". Christ bore the judgment for our sins at Calvary. Our eternal future is secure in Him. But there will come a time in heaven, after the Lord has come to take His Church to Himself, when each believer will have his service reviewed at the judgment seat of Christ – "if any man's work ...endures, he will receive a reward" (3:14).

*Only one life, 'twill soon be past;
Only what's done for Christ will last!*

Let's be building up!

The section closes on a very strong warning: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are" (verses 16 and 17). No one in the true Church of Christ is in view here – "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). The solemn warning is against those in the professing Church who are not true believers and the damage their false teaching and bad practice can cause.

The dwelling place of God is not only in the Church collectively but in each individual believer. So Paul asks the Corinthians, "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Wake up!

This final section of chapter 3 is Paul's wake up call to believers. Let's not get caught up in the wisdom of this world, or put our trust in men! Rather let us rejoice in all the eternal blessings Christ has given us. We are indissolubly linked to Him and through Him to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Chapter 4 can similarly be divided into three sections:

Verses 1-5	Be faithful!
Verses 6-13	Be humble!
Verses 14-21	Be warned!

Here are three life-styles to challenge us.

Be faithful!

Paul is very much aware, and would remind the Corinthian believers that we are only stewards of whatever gifts the Lord may have given us. The Bible assures us that each believer has been given some gift (Ephesians 4:7). If a friend gave me £10,000, the fact that I had such a large sum in the bank would not be any reflection of my achievement. After all, I had been given it! So God entrusts each of us with a gift, or gifts, not to fill us with pride and to make us boast, but rather that we might use such gifts for His glory. Verse 5 is one of the most searching verses in the Bible: "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts; and then each one's praise will come from God". Praise from God is the only praise worth having and will endure for eternity.

Be humble!

Then Paul challenges us to: Be humble! There is a touch of holy sarcasm in verse 8: "You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us – and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we might also reign with you!" The lavish lifestyle of some of the Corinthians was in marked contrast to the humble, unwearied service of the apostle Paul. Not now, but at the coming of the Lord would be the time for reigning! Paul continues in a similar way, "For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonoured! Even to the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labour, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure it; being defamed, we entreat. We are made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now" (verses 9-13). Paul uses the word 'spectacle' as a reference to the gladiatorial contests in the arena. The world, and more importantly, angels would look on at this stirring spectacle as the apostles and other Christians suffered unto death. Paul's moving description of the hardships of his life is an accurate fulfilment

of the Lord's words to Ananias immediately following Paul's Damascus road experience: "I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16).

Jim Elliot, a missionary martyred by Auca Indians in the Ecuador jungle, knew something of Paul's spirit when, as a young man of 22, he wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose". May we, like Paul and Jim, be found as humble followers of the Master who said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Be warned!

As noted at the beginning, Paul writes to the Corinthians out of the deep love he bears them as his spiritual children. He can say, "Imitate me". Much of the New Testament was not yet written to teach the Corinthians. They could not have a better teacher or role model for following Christ than the apostle. How many of us dare say, "Imitate me"? Paul wanted his next visit to them to be one of gentleness and blessing, rather than wielding the rod in discipline. If Paul were to visit us today, how would he come? We need to heed his teaching in this important epistle!

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