

“Building a Spiritual Foundation”

(1 Corinthians 3:10-17 ~ Part I)

Introduction

➤ While continuing his teaching on Christian unity, and his condemnation of church disunity, the apostle Paul shifted his analogy from agriculture to construction – from planting, watering, and growing to builders and buildings.

1 Cor 3:9 ~ “For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”

➤ The analogy has changed, and with it comes an opportunity for greater understanding, but the main point has not changed: Christians are to be united together in and for Christ. Divisions and discord should not be tolerated in the church, for Christians share a fellowship together in Christ. As Christ is not divided so too followers of Christ should not be divided.

1 Cor 3:10-17 ~ “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. ¹¹For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – ¹³each 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. ¹⁴If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. ¹⁶Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”

➤ Christians have their spiritual lives founded in Christ – He alone is their Lord and Savior. Likewise, Christians are live their lives on the foundation of Christ. That is, we are to do everything in the name of Christ, according to the will of Christ, and for the glory of Christ. This is neither hyperbole nor fantasy (1Cor.10:31). And it is impossible to do apart from Christ and the indwelling power of God’s Holy Spirit (Jn.15:4-5).

Thankfully, God’s Word gives instructions as to how we are to live our lives in and for Christ. In this passage, 1 Corinthians 3:10-17, we can readily identify six key aspects of building a spiritual foundation on Christ.

I. The builders (vs.10)

➤ First, we must note yet again, that the apostle Paul understood clearly that his apostolic calling and authority was “*given to [him]*” by God (vs.10; cf. 1:1, 17; 2:1-5), and was specifically an act of “*the grace of God*” (vs.10; Eph.3:7-8) – he was a person saved by the grace of God, a preacher who proclaimed the Gospel of the grace of God, and an apostle who was called by the grace of God. In other words, Paul knew that he (first and foremost) served the Lord and that he had neither deserved nor earned such a position of spiritual leadership.

This Christ-centered humility is essential for every Christian (Eph.4:2; Phil.2:3ff; 1Pet.3:8; 5:5-6), and especially for any Christian who is called into (vocational) Christian ministry (see 2Cor.4:5; 1Pet.5:3; Jms.3:1).

Matt 20:25-28 ~ “But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”

➤ Paul then described his ministry analogously in writing: *“like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation”* (vs.10). In saying that he was *“a skilled master builder”*, Paul is not boasting in his own gifts, knowledge, or talents – as have seen him consistently discourage anyone from thinking that the effectiveness of his ministry was due to his own abilities (1:17; 2:1, 4). Rather, Paul knew that he was sent and empowered by God to serve as *“a skilled master builder”* (*sophos architektōn*; “wise architect”) in laying the *“foundation”* (*themelios*) for new churches, the conversion of new Christians, by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who had not yet heard the Gospel.

1 Cor 2:1-2 ~ “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

1 Cor 9:16 ~ “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”

Rom 15:20 ~ “and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation”

Rom 15:20 ~ “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.” (NIV)

Eph 2:19-22 ~ “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²²In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

Acts 20:24 ~ “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

➤ This helps us to understand Paul’s next statement: *“and someone else is building upon it”* (vs.10). After Paul laid the foundation of Gospel preaching (core doctrines of the Gospel), it was time for someone else to continue teaching and discipling these new Christians in Christ. In Ephesus, Timothy specifically fulfilled this responsibility (1Tim.1:3), and in Corinth it was Apollos (who was a brilliant and eloquent biblical scholar; see Acts 18:24).

In the previous passage, Paul said that same thing using an agricultural analogy:

1 Cor 3:6 ~ “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”

Eph 4:11-12 ~ “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”

➤ But Apollos was not the only pastor/preacher/teacher to have an impact on these Corinthians (4:15). As is true for us today, most Christians have many Christian leaders who influence them on their Christian walk. With that in mind, Paul gives this admonition: *“Let each one take care how he builds upon it”* (vs.10). Anyone who seeks to be a Christian teacher/leader must *“take care”* (*blepō*; watch) how he ministers in the name of Christ.

1 Tim 4:13-16 ~ “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. ¹⁴Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. ¹⁶Keep a close watch [*epechō*] on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

Matt 18:5-6 ~ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

James 3:1 ~ “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

2. The foundation (vs.II)

➤ The foundation is the most vital part of any structure. If the foundation is unsound, if it is crooked or fragile, whatever is built upon it will be compromised and will eventually collapse. This certainly, most significantly, true when it comes to spiritual things.

A true church, and a true Christian, is first and foremost established on the person and work of Jesus Christ. In fact, all Scripture testifies to the supremacy of Jesus Christ, and the centrality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (see Ps.118:22; Mk.12:10; Acts 4:11; Eph.2:20; 1Pet.2:6-7).

John 5:39 ~ “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me”

Luke 24:27 ~ “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

Luke 24:44-45 ~ “Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures”

John 1:45 ~ “Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’”

➤ This simply cannot be overstated: the foundation of any true church is Jesus Christ – not Christian tradition, social ethics, religious rituals, mystical spiritualism, worldly philosophies, moralistic humanism, secular psychology, or political activism. Churches, and Christian ministries, that are built on any foundation other than Christ are unstable and will eventually collapse (no matter how impressive or stable they appear to be). And in the wreckage of their downfall are many casualties.

Matt 7:24-27 ~ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

➤ The foundation of the church, the foundation of Christianity, is not open to one’s own interpretation, or a person’s wants and opinions. This foundation is ordained and established by God and is therefore non-negotiable. Preachers, church leaders – no matter their popularity, creativity, or cleverness – do not have the authority to make the church what they want it to be. Christianity is to be about Christ, and a Christless Christianity is not Christianity.

They may seem too obvious to state, but today in evangelicalism we have many so-called Christian churches, and Christian ministries, that are based on something other than Jesus Christ. Christ is neither their priority nor their passion. Rather, their focus is on growing a big church, or being famous, or getting rich, and they seek to accomplish such things by preaching self-help, politically correct, socially-acceptable, and entertaining/inspirational messages. This ought not to be surprising, however, for we read in Scripture that such people will arise in an attempt to deceive others (see Matt.7:15; Acts 20:29-30; 2Tim.4:3-4; 2Pet.2; Jd.1:4).

➤ This is what Paul was referring to when he wrote: *“For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ”* (vs.11). Notice that the *“foundation”* is *“Jesus Christ”*, and that foundation has already been *“laid”* (vs.11). In other words, it is impossible to truly change the foundation of Christianity as it is impossible to undo what Christ has already done (or prevent Christ from doing what He is going to do).

All the false teachers and false preachers, all the Gospel marketers and celebrity pastors, all the spiritual gurus and religious experts, have not (and cannot) destroy the foundation of Christianity; *“which is Jesus Christ”* (vs.11; see 1Pet.2:6-8).

Matt 16:15-18 ~ “[Jesus] said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ ¹⁶Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’”

➤ Paul was only able to lay this foundation (vs.10) by the faithful preaching of the Gospel of Christ. Any departure from the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, is a failure to lay a true Christian foundation.

3. The materials (vs.12)

➤ As Christians, we are all to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. That is, every Christian is called to serve Christ and to live in faithful obedience to Him. This is how a Christian *“builds on the foundation”* (vs.12) of Jesus Christ.

In keeping with the analogy, Paul describes the “materials” of Christian ministry as *“gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw”* (vs.12). It seems unlikely that each of these specific items has some spiritual meaning. Rather, Paul was just giving a sample of various materials that are used in the building of a structure. As is evident in the subsequent verses, all such material can be grouped into two categories: 1) Superior (comparably valuable) materials – *“gold, silver, precious stones”*, or 2) Inferior (comparably cheap) materials – *“wood, hay, straw”*. Keep in mind, these are not classes of godly vs. ungodly, or good vs. evil. More accurately they represent best vs. good (as the saying goes, “Good is often the enemy of the best.”)

➤ The application here is rather simple. Whereas some Christians are tremendously faithful and obedient to Christ (sacrificing much – time, energy, money – for the good of the church and the Gospel of Christ), other Christians are content to do very little for the kingdom of God.

The latter are not willing to sacrifice anything of great value – *“wood, hay, straw”* (vs.12). They – whether due to laziness, worldliness, or ignorance – do not give Christ their best, but whatever is easy and/or self-benefitting. Such Christians are often pew-sitters only; they are not actively or sacrificially serving Christ; they do very little (if anything) in Christian ministry; they believe that God should sufficiently pleased with their mere attendance/presence (or acknowledgment of Him), and that He not ask them do to anything more (and if/when they do serve, they typically want to be recognized, reimbursed, or rewarded). Their work is often self-serving, trivial, or half-hearted.

On the other hand, there is the faithful and sacrificial Christian – those who sacrifice great things for the kingdom of Christ – *“gold, silver, precious stones”* (vs.12). They are not content with merely being a Christian, nor are they primarily concerned about “getting fed” or “being served.” They want to be actively involved in Christian ministry, not just watching (benefitting from, criticizing) others who are actively involved in Christian ministry. They are willing to give sacrificially of their time, energy, and money – with pure and selfless motives – in order to serve others in the church and in an effort to advance the Gospel.

➤ It is important to remember that this is not a comparison of good verses bad, or godly things verses sinful things. They are a comparison of values – *“gold, silver, precious stones”* (vs.12) are very costly and durable, whereas *“wood, hay, straw”* (vs.12) are comparably inexpensive and destructible.

4. The test (vs.13)

➤ Every Christian's work will be tested by God on the day of judgment: *"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"* (vs.13). Fire is symbolic of God's purifying and revealing discernment (*"test"* [dokimazō]).

We are not saved by good works, but unto good works (Eph.2:8-10; 2Tim.1:9; Tit.3:5).

Therefore, this is not referring to us earning or losing our salvation, but the faithfulness to which we live out our salvation in Christ.

1 Cor 3:15 ~ "If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire [pyr]."

➤ Notice the language that is used here, in verse 13: *"manifest"* (phaneros), *"disclose"* (dēloō), and *"revealed"* (apokalyptō). All these words show us the process, and essentially the result, of God's testing. Just as fire purifies metal, so will the fire of God's omniscience burn up the dross and leave what is pure and valuable (see Job 23:10; Zech.13:9; 1Pet.1:17; Rev.1:14; 3:18): *"each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire [pyr], and the fire [pyr] will test what sort of work each one has done"* (vs.13).

1 Cor 4:5 ~ "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light [phōtizō] the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose [phaneroō] the purposes [boulē] of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God."

1 Cor 4:5 ~ "So then, do not judge anything before the time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the motives of hearts. Then each will receive recognition from God." (NET)

1 Cor 4:5 ~ "Therefore don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God." (HCSB)

Heb 4:13 ~ "And no creature is hidden [aphanēs] from his sight, but all are naked [gymnos] and exposed [trachēlizō] to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

➤ This testing will occur on *"the Day"* (vs.13) which is not defined but seems to refer to the Day when Christ returns (see Heb.10:25; 1Thess.5:4). While unbelievers will appear before the judgment of God (i.e., *"the great white throne"*; Rev.20:11-15) where they will receive the God's eternal condemnation (Matt.25:41; Jn.3:16; Rom.2:5; 6:23), believers will appear before *"the judgment seat of Christ"* (2Cor.5:10) where they will not be judged/condemned (Jn.3:18; Rom.5:1; 8:1) but will be tested and possibly rewarded.

1 Cor 4:5 ~ "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God."

2 Cor 5:10 ~ "For we must all appear before the judgment seat [bēma] of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

Rom 14:10-12 ~ "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat [bēma] of God; ¹¹for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' ¹²So then each of us will give an account [logos] of himself to God."

Conclusion

➤ Charles Thomas Studd, better known as C. T. Studd, was a British missionary. He was born on December 2, 1860, in Spratton, United Kingdom, into a family of wealth and privilege. C.T. became a Christian when a preacher, who was visiting in their home, implored him to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. He would later state: **“I got down on my knees and I did say ‘thank you’ to God. And right then and there joy and peace came into my soul. I knew then what it was to be ‘born again,’ and the Bible which had been so dry to me before, became everything.”**

In 1883 he graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, and in 1885 (at the age of 25) entered the mission field with Hudson Taylor in China (after hearing Taylor speak about the lost in China, C.T. along with six other students from Cambridge, known as the “Cambridge Seven”, dedicated their lives to serving China Inland Missions alongside Hudson Taylor). C.T. Studd spent his life in dedicated service to the Lord, serving in China, India, and Africa. When challenged as to why he was preparing for a life of inevitable hardship he replied, **“If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him.”** C.T. died on July 16, 1931 at the age of 70.

C.T. is perhaps most famous for a poem that he wrote:

*Two little lines I heard one day, Traveling along life's busy way;
Bringing conviction to my heart, And from my mind would not depart;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, yes only one, Soon will its fleeting hours be done;
Then, in 'that day' my Lord to meet, And stand before His Judgment seat;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, the still small voice, Gently pleads for a better choice
Bidding me selfish aims to leave, And to God's holy will to cleave;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, a few brief years, Each with its burdens, hopes and fears;
Each with its days I must fulfill, living for self or in His will;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*When this bright world would tempt me sore, When Satan would a victory score;
When self would seek to have its way, Then help me Lord with joy to say;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Give me Father, a purpose deep, In joy or sorrow Thy word to keep;
Faithful and true whate'er the strife, Pleasing Thee in my daily life;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Oh let my love with fervor burn, And from the world now let me turn;
Living for Thee, and Thee alone, Bringing Thee pleasure on Thy throne;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, yes only one, Now let me say, “Thy will be done”;
And when at last I'll hear the call, I know I'll say “'twas worth it all”;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.*