

## **THE CHURCH AS THE TEMPLE OF GOD**

### **1 Corinthians 3:9b-17**

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Based on interviews with 601 Senior Pastors nationwide, representing a random cross-section of Protestant churches, George Barna reports that only half of the country's Protestant pastors – 51% - have a biblical worldview. Defining such a worldview as: (1) believing that absolute moral truth exists; (2) that it is based upon the Bible, and (3) having a biblical view on six core beliefs (the accuracy of biblical teaching, the sinless nature of Jesus, the literal existence of Satan, the omnipotence and omniscience of God, salvation by grace alone, and the personal responsibility to evangelize), Barna produced data showing that there are significant variations by denominational affiliation and other demographics.

“The most important point,” Barna argued, “is that you can't give people what you don't have. The low percentage of Christians who have a biblical worldview is a direct reflection of the fact that half of our primary religious teachers and leaders do not have one. In some denominations, the vast majority of clergy do not have a biblical worldview, and it shows up clearly in the data related to the theological views and moral choices of people who attend those churches.”

“The research also points out that even in churches where the pastor has a biblical worldview,” he continued, “most of the congregants do not. More than six out of every seven congregants in the typical church do not share the biblical worldview of their pastor even when he or she has one. This intimates that merely preaching good sermons and offering helpful programs does not enable most believers to develop a practical and scriptural theological base to shape their life. Our research among people who have a biblical worldview shows that it is a long-term process that requires a lot of purposeful activity: teaching, prayer, conversation, accountability, and so forth. Based on our correlations of worldview and moral behavior, we can confidently argue that if the 51% of pastors who have a biblical worldview were *to strategically and relentlessly assist their congregants in adopting such a way of interpreting and responding to life*, the impact on our churches, families and society at-large would be enormous.”

[<http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=156&Reference=B>, emphasis mine]

While we should not allow polls or surveys to drive our agenda in the work of the church, one such as this is enlightening, if not sobering, as to the state of the church today, especially in our nation. Even amongst those that profess to be conservative, Protestant, and Evangelical, pastors often take what my friend Tom Ascol calls the “Fox News motto: ‘We report: you decide.’” [Founders Journal, Issue 55, Winter 2004, p. 1]

We see in our text this morning that Paul would rebuke the minister that does not faithfully, seriously and humbly teach, correct, exhort and rebuke the people of God that he has been called to lead, feed, and protect. In these verses we see that *ministers will be held accountable for how they build Christ's Church, the temple of God.*

### **I. The Construction of the Building (3:9b-12)**

In the preceding section, Paul established what godly leadership looked like by using agricultural metaphor. Some sow or plant, some come behind and water, but he reminded these at Corinth that God alone gives the increase and it is God who oversees those who plant, those

who water, etc. In other words, church work is God's work. In this section he changes from an agricultural to an architectural metaphor to further describe God's church. As we look at this section, it is fitting that we take Paul's description as we would a description of any construction site where a building is being erected. We can easily visualize a jobsite with blueprints, a foreman, a foundation being laid, construction workers or crews frantically working to meet their deadline, and the building rising up from the ground.

### 1. The foreman (v. 10)

Paul describes himself here as the *architektōn* ("architect"). He was "**a wise master builder.**" Paul brought wisdom to the construction site. He laid the foundation in this analogy just as he sowed or planted in the agricultural analogy that preceded. Paul had a wise, precise strategy in what he knew to be the beginnings of the church. But it was not his own wisdom that he brought to the construction site, it was God's wisdom. Paul wrote that this wisdom was "**according to the grace of God which was given to me.**" What was this grace of God that was given to Paul? He further described it in Eph. 3:7-10:

of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly *places*.

Paul here reminds these at Corinth that he had been specially endowed and empowered by God for this job. As he wrote in Romans 15:20: "And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another's foundation." Paul had laid the foundation when he was with them with the sole purpose of establishing their faith as built on nothing other than that foundation.

1 Cor. 2:2, 5 – For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.... So that your faith would not rest on (or be built upon or founded upon) the wisdom of men, but the power of God.

So Paul's designation of himself as "**a wise master builder**" came from his understanding of his calling of God as the apostle to the Gentiles and he performed his work of carrying the gospel of God's grace to them by God's grace, in God's power and wisdom. It was in this manner, as "**a wise master builder,**" that he laid the foundation of what remains the church to this day. What is that foundation?

### 2. The foundation – "Jesus Christ" (v. 11)

Paul here once again reminds these at Corinth that Christ and Christ alone is the foundation of all that is in the church. Some had turned to Paul himself as the foundation of the church and sought to build upon his work. Some had turned to Apollos as the foundation and built upon his work. It is possible that some of these had misinterpreted Jesus' teaching in Matthew 16:18: "On this rock I build my church." Some at Corinth had taken these words literally, as Roman Catholics continue to do today. The foundation of the church was Peter himself and some at Corinth were of the "Peter faction" based on this belief. So we see why Paul once again reminds them of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified," as the *only* foundation, and that the foundation has

been finally and definitively laid. “It is finished!” That is how Paul could state it as an absurdity or impossibility – “**No man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid** (done, finished, poured and set), **which is** (forever is, continually is, eternally is) **Jesus Christ.**” It is not a matter of building on the *right* foundation, as if multiple foundations exist for this building. Jesus Christ is the *only* foundation! A building built on any other foundation other than this foundation, Jesus Christ, is not the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and is built on no foundation at all. PERIOD! Not Paul, not Apollos, not Peter. Islam – no foundation. Hinduism – no foundation. Mormonism – no foundation. Jehovah Witnesses – no foundation. Liberal Protestant theology – no foundation. Humanism – no foundation. Relativism – no foundation. Narcissism – no foundation. The foundation is Jesus Christ alone!

### 3. The builders (v. 10, 12)

In verse 9, Paul wrote that he and Apollos were “**God’s fellow workers**” or “God’s fellow ministers” in the agricultural metaphor, and the church in general was “**God’s field.**” Paul then changes the metaphor to the architectural metaphor by referring to the church at Corinth as “**God’s building.**” After designating himself as the foreman, he introduces “**those who build.**” Some see this as a general reference to all in the body of Christ who build upon the foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. While it is certainly true that *all* Christians are called to build in some sense in many places in Scripture, Paul does not have *all* Christians in mind here. Remember our context. He is dealing with the schism caused by those who had assumed roles of leadership in the church. “**Those who build**” describe the ministers whom God had called in the work of the ministry, the same as “**God’s fellow workers**” in the preceding metaphor, those who planted and watered together. Paul’s statement is directed towards those who had assumed leadership in the church since his departure. Where he specifically mentions Apollos as the one who furthered the work of his planting by watering in the previous illustration, here Paul simply says, “**Another is building on it. Each man must be careful how he builds on it.... If any man builds on the foundation....**” Paul does not single out Apollos or Peter but speaks to all that would build on the foundation which had been laid. The builders were those who had assumed the leadership at the church of Corinth – and Paul warns them to take heed how they built. These verses continue the rebuke against factionalism that Paul had begun in the opening verses of this chapter. It had become rather evident that they were not building on the one foundation of Jesus Christ but on the personalities that were involved in the planting and the ongoing work of the church at Corinth.

### 4. The superstructure (v. 12)

In describing the materials used in this building analogy, Paul uses language that would be easily recognized by those at Corinth. The gold, silver and precious stones were descriptive of materials used in adorning the OT temple of Solomon as well as the reconstructed temple of Herod (Mt. 24:1-2). In particular, these materials were also used in the construction of the temple of Apollo found in Corinth. The wood, hay and stubble would also have been recognized by the Corinthians as materials used in building ordinary structures such as a house. “Their homes and ordinary buildings were framed with wood; hay or dried grass was mixed with mud to form the walls; and straw or stalks were thatched to make the roof.” [Mare & Harris, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: 1&2 Corinthians*, 35]

However, there has been great debate amongst commentators for centuries as to what these materials represent in Paul’s spiritual building. Having seen without any debate whatsoever the

foreman, Paul, and the foundation, Jesus Christ, and with some debate as to the identity of the builders, the superstructure has more disagreement among scholars. All are agreed that Paul describes two categories of materials: (1) gold, silver and precious stones that are valuable and durable, and (2) wood, hay and stubble that are basically worthless and perishable. But the agreement ends there. Roman Catholic scholars believe that the materials represent the works of a Christian, the finer materials representing the good works of the believer and the lesser materials their venial sins. The more common view, particularly among Protestants and Evangelicals, is that the gold, silver and precious stones represent doctrine rightly discerned and taught by ministers, and the lesser materials represent incorrect and inaccurate details of doctrine but not heresy. John Calvin and Matthew Henry are among the most noted commentators that held this view and have influenced the thought of numerous others. However, given the context of Paul's writing, I believe R. L. Dabney is correct in his view that the materials given here represent the *spiritual condition* of individuals in the church and not the *doctrinal teaching* of the ministers, or builders, of the church. Dabney wrote, "The gold, silver, precious stones are genuine and regenerate persons introduced into the church by the labors of wise and faithful ministers, while the wood, hay, stubble represent spurious converts, and unconverted professors of religion introduced into the church by less judicious laborers" [Dabney, *Discussions of Robert L. Dabney, An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 3:10-15*, 553]. This view obviously does not discount the importance of sound doctrine or the expositional teaching and preaching of the Word. It is through the faithful proclamation of the Word that one comes to faith in Christ and grows in Him. Dabney certainly understood that.

## II. The Testing of the Building (3:13-15)

### 1. The day of testing (1 Thess. 5:2-9; 2 Thess. 2:2)

### 2. The means of testing - fire (purifying agent, Mt. 3:11; Mark 9:49; consuming, Mt. 3:12; 2 Thess. 1:7,8; Heb. 12:29)

The picture is of one who barely escapes a building engulfed in flames. He escapes "by the skin of his teeth, so to speak. In this analogy, the salvation of the individual is not in question. The minister has come to faith in Christ and is part of the true church of Christ. However, while he might know Christ, we have here the example of one who neglected his calling and did not heed the warning to "**build carefully on the foundation.**"

### 3. The result of the testing (standing, Mt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27)

"By the perishable *work* of this laborer, Paul understands the Christian life without seriousness, humility, self-denial, personal communion with Christ, which has been produced among the members of the Church by the ministry of a preacher solely concerned to move sensibility, to charm the mind and please his audience." [Godet, quoted by Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 43]

This ought to be extremely sobering for all who are engaged in vocational ministry. It is possible to 'build the church' with such shoddy materials that at the last day you have nothing to show for your labor. People may come, feel 'helped,' join in corporate worship, serve on committees, teach Sunday School classes, bring their friends, enjoy 'fellowship,' raise funds, participate in counseling sessions and self-help groups, but still

not really know the Lord. If the church is being built by large portions of charm, personality, easy oratory, positive thinking, managerial skills, powerful and emotional experiences, and people smarts, but without repeated, passionate, Spirit-anointed proclamation of 'Jesus Christ and him crucified,' we may be winning more adherents than converts. Not for a moment am I suggesting that, say, managerial skills are unnecessary, or that basic people skills are merely optional. But the fundamental nonnegotiable, that without which the church is no longer the church, is the gospel, God's 'folly,' Jesus Christ and him crucified. [D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 80]

### III. The Identification of the Building (3:16-17)

In verse 16, Paul changes from addressing the builders, or ministers, back to the building itself and further identifies some of its characteristics.

#### 1. The temple

**“Do you not know that you are a temple of God?”** Questioning in this manner was one of Paul's favorite rhetorical devices. It was his way of gracious but strong rebuke. Wherever Paul asks, “Do you not know?” you can rest assured that it was a question whose answer was of no dispute. The answer was one that all should know but have forgotten to live by. This is the case here. **“Do you not know that you are a temple of God?”**

Paul's identifying the church as the temple of God is in keeping with his architectural metaphor. Some see this as a reference to the individual being the temple of God. While this is the case later in Paul's writing in 1 Cor. 6:19 where he wrote: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you?” it is not the case in this verse. The **“you”** is plural, **“you all.”** In this text, Paul has the church in general in mind. However, in identifying the church as **“the temple,”** he brings the metaphorical illustration to a close. The church actually *is* the temple of God! The gold, silver and precious stones would be identified with the temple. The wood, hay and stubble would not.

In v. 17 Paul further describes this temple as **“holy,”** **“The temple of God is holy.”** **“Holy”** can take on one of two meanings in Scripture depending on its use. One use of the word denotes a moral quality, the aspect of purity, without stain or blemish. The other meaning is literally “to set apart or to be separate from.” The context here plainly calls for the latter meaning for we know that the church at Corinth (or any church for that matter) was not completely holy or morally pure. The church is made of saints (set apart ones) who are still sinful. So Paul describes the temple, which they were, as “set apart,” **“holy .”** But from what were they “set apart” or “separate?” *The world!* This goes right back to the heart of the problem at Corinth. They were more like the world, living according to the spirit of the world (2:12); they were still fleshly (3:3). They looked more like the world than the church! And so Paul asked, **“Do you not know that you are a temple of God? And don't you remember that “the temple of God is holy (set apart), and that is what you are (set apart)?”**

Another aspect that we see about **“the temple”** is that Paul uses the word for **“temple”** that refers to the inner sanctuary, not the general word used for **“temple”** that would include all of the temple with its outer and inner courtyards. Here Paul refers to the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies, the place of God's presence. Which brings us to the second identification of the building, its tenant.

## 2. The tenant (Eph. 2:22; 1 Peter 2:5)

Paul continues his negative question and in doing so identifies the tenant of the temple: “**Do you not know that you are a temple of God and do you not know that the Spirit of God dwells in you?**” Paul had already written in 1 Cor. 2:12 that they had “received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God.” This is why their conduct that was causing division within the church was reprehensible. They were not demonstrating that they were the temple of God where the very Spirit of God was pleased to dwell (Eph. 2:22). They were not acting as “living stones, built up as a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). As a matter of fact, they were living more like their father was the devil. They did not have Paul’s warning to the Thessalonians, but we can see from 2 Thess. 2:4 Paul’s description of the attempt of Satan to usurp the throne of the temple of God. In that verse Paul describes Satan as “the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, *displaying himself as being God*.”

Hence, the warning we see in verse 17.

## 3. The warning

Those whose intent it is to destroy the temple will themselves be destroyed. This person is different than the minister described in the preceding verses. That minister’s motive was to build up, not to tear down. While that minister may or may not be building with the right materials, his intent is to build. This person has an entirely different motive. His very purpose is to destroy the temple, to tear it down, just as those in previous times sought to destroy the temple of Solomon and the rebuilt temple destroyed in A.D. 70. The “if” clause used in the Greek here indicates that this deception and destruction was in fact occurring in the church at Corinth. You might be familiar with this type of clause from Galatians 1:9 where Paul wrote, “If any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed.” Here again, this indicates an action that was already occurring in Galatia. These men, these leaders, know that the foundation of the temple is Jesus Christ and they were seeking to destroy anything and everything that was associated with the foundation. These men, Paul said, would be destroyed by God. They will suffer the eternal wrath of God for all eternity.

While we might easily identify this sort of person *outside* the church, we must remember that this type of destruction comes from within. This has been the case since the garden. Satan’s very intent in the garden was to tear down, to destroy, and this has been his intent ever since. In the church, we are warned by Matthew to beware of the wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt. 7:15). This describes the one inside the church that is doing the work of his father, the devil. And his purpose is to tear down the church – not the physical building itself – but its reputation in itself and in the community. The father of lies has his minions at work within and without the church, and his work is the work of deceit and destruction. These false prophets, these wicked leaders, are those who Paul said would be destroyed by the almighty wrath of God.

*ILLUS: Nadab & Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2)*

## Conclusion

**To the building** – Do you faithfully pray for the builders, your ministers? Do you pray for future ministers that God may raise up to serve not only South Woods but those that we will send

out to minister elsewhere, whether it be on the mission field or in the local pastorate? Do you encourage as well as exhort your ministers? Do you pray for the building?

**To the builders** – Are you building? Upon what are you building? Is the gospel of Christ the foundation? And with what materials are you building? If it is with wood, hay and stubble, then the construction might appear fine from the outside, but on judgment day your reward will be nothing but an ash heap. May we as ministers heed these sobering words and be forever analyzing our ministry in light of the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.