

Farmers and Builders

I Corinthians 3:1-17

If it is true that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” then you are going to get a full-length book this morning! I want you to walk out of here today with pictures in your mind from the text we are going to examine. Let me read the passage and then we’ll go back and open up a photo album. Turn to the book of First Corinthians.

I Corinthians 3:1-17

To begin with today, I want you to see four pictures that Paul gives of the Corinthian believers:

1) Infant

To help you remember these pictures, I am going to use a hat that would be symbolic of each picture. So, for the infant, we have a **baby bonnet**.

Paul says, “I can’t talk to you as spiritual people, but as babies.” In the previous chapter, he differentiated between a natural person and a spiritual person. The natural person is one who is devoid of the Spirit. This person operates only on the physical / natural plane. They don’t know Christ; in fact, Paul says they don’t even welcome the things of the Spirit of God.

The spiritual person is the one who lives in the realm of the Spirit. They have believed the gospel and trusted in Christ for salvation. The Holy Spirit lives within them.

Now Paul differentiates between a spiritual person and a carnal person, who is described as an infant or baby. It isn’t that the carnal person doesn’t have the Holy Spirit; rather it is that the Holy Spirit is not in charge.

Paul goes on to say several things about the believers in Corinth whom he calls infants. First, they can handle only milk, not solid food. This is really an indictment against the Corinthians. Many had been believers for a few years. Paul says back in chapter one, verse 7, that the church as a whole was not lacking in any spiritual gift.

They had received God’s salvation; they had experienced spiritual transformation, but rather than growing out of babyhood into adults, or at least adolescents, they were still acting like infants.

Now, I love babies. We have some wonderful new babies here at Knollwood. But, if two years from now their diapers still need changing and they need a bottle every four hours, there's something wrong with that.

Spiritually, these believers should have been growing in their faith such that Paul could speak to them as spiritual people and give them the solid food of God's wisdom.

The writer of Hebrews describes the situation that really fits with the Corinthians. He writes:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. – *Hebrews 5:12-14*

Paul tells the Corinthians that they weren't ready for solid food. The reason is because they were still fleshly or carnal. This means they were controlled by natural, human impulses rather than by the Spirit of God.

That this was true is evidenced by their jealousy and strife, that is, their fighting amongst themselves for position and status, recognition and honor. This shows up in their choosing sides and claiming superiority by who they said they were following: Paul, Peter, Apollos, and the real spiritual ones – Christ.

We need to ask this question of ourselves: "Have I grown up as a follower of Christ or do I still live like a spiritual baby? What does my life look like? How about my attitudes? How do I treat people? What is my devotional life like? Am I trusting God more now in my circumstances of life than I did three years ago? Is the fruit of the Spirit more evident in my life today than it was a few years ago?"

If Paul were to write you or me a letter, would he write to us as spiritual men and women or as babes in Christ?

Listen, if you are a new Christian, it's okay that you are still in infancy. But don't stay there. Get into the Scriptures, look for opportunities to grow in your knowledge and understanding of God. Trust him more and more with the details of your life. This is the same prescription for all of us in spiritual growth.

The second picture is a field.

2) Field

In verse 9, Paul says that these believers are God's field. So, I have my **John Deere hat** as a image for you to remember.

This is the only place in the New Testament where this particular word appears. It means "a cultivated field or ground." It is this "field" in which Paul and Apollos have been working. I think we need to ask, "What kind of soil were they?" Obviously, the soil received the word of the gospel and men and women were converted to Christ. A church was established. God certainly was at work when Paul began his ministry there.

What kind of field are we – not just for the initial work of salvation, but the ongoing work of spiritual growth? Is your life such that the crop of faith might grow to maturity? What kinds of things are needed for the good soil that will support such growth?

The Word; fellowship; service; community, etc. The third picture is a building.

3) Building

Here's the hat for you to remember "building." – **A construction hard hat**

In verse nine, Paul also says that the church in Corinth was a building. He says that the foundation for this building is Jesus Christ. There is and can be no other foundation for spiritual life. Without a solid foundation, you have an unstable, unsafe, untenable building.

Construction of the Tower of Pisa in Italy began on August 14, 1173 and continued over the next 344 years. The tower began to sink after construction had progressed to the second floor in 1178. This was due to a mere 10-foot deep foundation, set in weak, unstable subsoil, a design that was flawed from the beginning. Efforts have been made since the late 20th century to stabilize the tower.

Paul declares the foundation upon which the church was built. Samuel Stone was a pastor in England during a heated period of theological controversy in 1866. At stake were the great cardinal doctrines of the faith. He wrote this hymn to reaffirm the Lordship of Christ as the foundation of the church. Here is the first verse:

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation by water and the Word:
from heav'n He came and sought her
to be His holy bride;
with His own blood He bought her,
and for her life He died.

Here's the fourth picture by way of Paul's description of the believers in Corinth:

4) Temple

Look again at **Verses 16 & 17**.

Here's my hat for this one: a **Mongolian temple hat**.

There are two different Greek words used in the New Testament that are translated "temple." The first is *hierón*. This word meant all the Temple grounds. The second word is *naós*. It means the inmost part of the Temple, that is, the sanctuary.

This is the word Paul uses here. Now, he isn't speaking of individual believers are being the sanctuary of God. He will make that point later in chapter six. The "you's" in these verses are plural. Paul is speaking of the church as a community of believers. The church, the local body of Christ in Corinth, was the sanctuary of God.

What an amazing thing to say! Here is this relatively small group of Christians gathering in house churches amidst the opulent temples of pagan gods. And he calls them "the temple of God." Almost laughable from a human perspective. But this goes back to Paul's point about the foolishness of God viewed through human eyes.

Listen, regardless of how silly it might seem, Knollwood Church, as a community of believers, is the temple of God where the Spirit of God dwells. Just as the sanctuary of the Old Testament tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, represented the presence of God Almighty, so this church, and every local church, represents the very presence of God.

We might understand this as the dwelling of God through the omni-present Spirit. We should also see this dwelling by virtue of the fact that the Spirit indwells every believer here and thus his presence is manifested through his people.

This is a very serious thing. Paul says that God will destroy any who seek to destroy the Church. Perhaps this should encourage us as we see the world's assault on all that we regard holy and true. It is God who will avenge his honor and his name. Our responsibility is to live as those in whom the Spirit dwells.

Four pictures of the Corinthian church: infants, field, building, temple.

Now, let's go back over the text and see the two pictures that Paul gives to the Corinthians that they might understand the ministry of Apollos and himself among those in Corinth.

1) A Farmer

Paul says, “I want you to understand the work that Apollos and I do in you as God’s field.” There are several things we should note in verses 5-9.

- Paul identifies themselves as servants. The word is *diaconos*, meaning simply “to serve.” They were servants. While there were people in the church seeking to exalt themselves, to secure a superior position and standing, Paul and Apollos came to serve them. In chapter two, Paul says that he was with them “in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.”

Paul was utmost concerned about their spiritual growth and discipleship. He followed the example of Jesus who “humbled himself” as a servant. The Apostle John wrote in his third epistle about a man who was very much like those in Corinth. He says:

I have written something to the church, but Diotrefes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. – *III John 9*

People like this man destroy the unity of the church even today. Remember that this whole section, from chapter one, verse 10, through chapter four is addressing the problem of disunity. There were people in the church who caused division and strife, infighting and open warfare, all to promote themselves.

We must be on guard, as a church and as individual believers, that such disunity not happen here. May God forbid that we begin to look and function like the church at Corinth. I have said before, and I will say again, how grateful to God I am that I have never felt or experienced that here at Knollwood all the years I have been your pastor. May God continue to protect us and bless us with a spirit of unity.

- Paul and Apollos each of them had a unique ministry from God. Paul says that he planted and Apollos watered. But the important thing, the predominate thing, is that God caused the growth. With the verb tenses that are used, the idea is that even in the planting and watering, God was causing the growth.

The reality is that you can have planting and watering, but apart from God’s work, all other work comes to naught.

- Consequently, Paul and Apollos were equal partners. For the Corinthians to exalt one over the other or one’s work over the other was totally off-base.

- Their tasks, therefore, were equal in value, both necessary and needed. You could not exalt one’s work over that of the other.

- Paul says they were God’s fellow-workers. He doesn’t mean here that they were on par with God, but that they were fellow workers in God’s service. Therefore, they were on equal par with each other, fellow-workers with God.

This further builds into the picture of them being servants. More important, though, than being servants of the believers in Corinth, they were servants of God to benefit the Corinthians.

- The last thing Paul says is that each receives their wage from God according to their labor. Laborers are rewarded for their work, not according to success.

Think of the application of all these things to us as those who are called to serve and to minister to others on behalf of Christ. We are co-laborers with each other, our work and roles equal in value to God.

God gives each of us a role to play in this “field” in which we work. Paul has something like this in mind when he says:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. – *Ephesians 2:10*

Do you embrace the work of a farmer in God’s field? Are you wearing the farmer’s hat, faithful in those things God has called you to do?

The second picture Paul gives of himself and Apollos as God’s servants is:

2) A Builder

Paul describes himself as a skilled master builder. From the Greek word he uses here, we get our English word *architect*. But the word doesn’t mean so much the one who designs the building, but rather the one is the supervisor of the day-to-day subcontractors. The person Paul has in mind, to put it in our building program experience, would be Doug – our project superintendent.

Paul says that as the project superintendent he laid down the foundation for this building of Corinthians believers, the foundation that was, he says in chapter two: “Christ and him crucified.”

Now he warns them that they must take care in how they build upon this foundation. That is, they must carefully build their spiritual lives and God’s kingdom. The reason is that they must one day give an account for how they have built.

He says that in the day of God's judgment, their work will be tested. The work they have done as Christians will be put to the fire. If it stands the test, they will receive reward; if not, their work is burned up, yet they are still saved and going to heaven.

David Garland writes that it is important to note that the purpose of this test of fire is not to punish; it is not to destroy; it is not to refine; but it is to disclose. This judgment is about reward, not salvation. These are all believers who undergo this judgment.

Turn in your Bible to the next book, Second Corinthians – chapter 5. Paul is speaking about this judgment that he refers to in First Corinthians. He admonishes Christians to live by faith, to live in such a way as pleasing the Lord. The reason is because we will one day all give account for the lives we have lived. Then he says:

II Corinthians 5:10

The word for judgment seat is *bēma*. It is also translated in other places in the New Testament as “tribunal.” Acts, chapter 18, gives the account of Paul's time in Corinth. After being there for 18 months, he was hauled before the “tribunal,” the *bēma* to appear before the proconsul to respond to Jewish complaints of his ministry.

In Greek states, the assembly met in front of a dais, a raised platform – the *bēma*. It was here that all official business was transacted. For the Romans, it was the platform upon which the magistrate would sit with members of his council to administer justice.

Here's a picture of the ruins of a *bēma* in Athens.

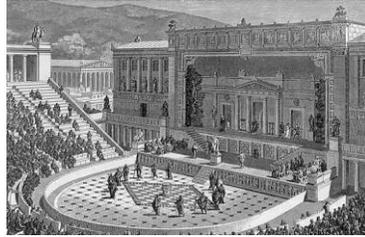


Much less remains of the *bēma* in Corinth. Here's what you see today:



In John 19:13, we read that Pilate sat down on the judgment seat, the *bēma*, and delivered Jesus over for crucifixion.

In Caesarea, Herod built great buildings, including a theater, within which was the *bēma*. Here's probably what the theater looked like in that day:



And a rendering of what the *bēma* might have looked like:.

The *bēma* was also the seat from which awards for various Grecian races and games were distributed. Perhaps Paul had both usages in mind.

Paul says that every believer will give an account before the judgment seat of Christ as to how they have built upon the foundation of Jesus. The materials we used to build will be tested so as to reveal the true nature of our work, the true character of our work. Does it stand the test?

On Thursday, April 5, a building in Mumbai, India, was put to the test by an earthquake and failed miserably.



The police have arrested nine people because of inferior construction.

Paul says don't fail to build God's kingdom properly. That's a great challenge to us individually as Christians and corporately as a church. We need to build God's way, using his materials: the Bible, prayer, fellowship, worship, service, evangelism, discipleship, etc. If you are a believer in Jesus, you wear these two hats: John Deere cap and a construction hard hat. Let's be diligent in how we do God's work here at and through Knollwood.