



151st Church of Christ
Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS
by Richard Wolfe

AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians

Lesson 5: 1 Corinthians 3:1-17

TEACHER

Review

- 1:1-17 The Problem: Division in the church
1:18-2:16 The fundamental and doctrinal solution: The message of the cross
3:1ff Back to the problem: Division in the church

OUTLINE

- 3:1-4 Carnal Christians
3:5-15 Ministers, followers and the temple
 5-9 Farming analogy
 10-15 Building analogy
3:16-17 Nature of the building

Paul had introduced the problem of church division in chapter 1 before leaving it while he discussed the differences between being followers of worldly wisdom and power or being followers of God's wisdom and power. He considered this natural versus spiritual perspective to provide the single and fundamental explanation of why the Corinthians were divided on a wide range of issues.

Now, in chapter 3, he returns to a direct treatment of the division in the Corinthian church (see "Review" above). But rather than merely documenting the problem and telling them to unite, he builds his exhortation on the doctrines presented in chapters 1 & 2. They were "in Christ," and therefore, called out of the world. "In Christ," they should follow the same spiritual understandings of life that had led them to become Christians in the first place.

DISCUSSION

1 Cor 3:1-4, Carnal Christians

1. Complete the syllogism

- **Spirituality means unity in Christ**
 - **You Corinthians are divided**
 - **Therefore: _____**
- Therefore: You are not spiritual. You are "of the world."

- Throughout this section Paul shows the seriousness of dividing the body of Christ. Here, he shows that division is proof of fleshly living. The various factions felt spiritually superior to each other, but the existence of factions was proof of a lack of spirituality.
- 2. In chapter 2, how had people who followed the wisdom and the power of this world reacted to the gospel (e.g., 2:14)? How does Paul connect that action of non-Christians to the behavior of Christians in Corinth?**
- By earthly wisdom, both Jews and Gentiles had rejected the gospel as foolishness.
 - If Christians reverted to living with a fleshly or worldly perspective, they would not grow out of spiritual infancy.
 - It's easy to understand Paul's criticism of the Corinthian situation, but it's better when we see the way this discussion flows from the natural/spiritual discussion that precedes it.
- 3. Why had Paul not fed them "solid food"? When had this occurred? (cf. 2:1-5; 5:9)**
- Their inability to handle it.
 - This probably occurred during his initial stay in Corinth which included his preaching of the gospel and follow-up teaching during that 2-year period. However, it could refer to the lost letter (5:9), though here in 3:1 he says, "could not speak," rather than "could not write."
 - At conversion, they were indeed "babes," but that was treated as a temporary situation that would diminish as they learned more about godly spirituality.
- 4. What had Paul taught what would be called "milk"? Is there anything wrong with "milk"? How should we feel about the immaturity we may have displayed earlier in our lives as Christians (our teen years, for example; consider 13:11)?**
- 1:23, Christ crucified is the most basic of spiritual foods. It sounds like the Corinthians may have complained in their letter to Paul about the simplicity of what Paul had taught them. Maybe they would have preferred complex philosophy or a more mystical spirituality. He explains that they were young Christians at the time and what he taught was appropriate at the time. The problem is that as he wrote this letter, they were still immature. By now, they should show better behavior based on better values and greater spiritual focus.
 - Sometimes today, people look back and criticize what they remember of sermons they heard 40-50 years ago and call them simplistic (5 acts of worship, 5-step plan of salvation, or even the simplicity of Sunday School stories). At the time simplicity may have been quite appropriate.
 - Sensitive souls often feel constant guilt because of inappropriate behavior or bad decisions they made years before. If we have repented and moved on to greater maturity, we should not feel guilty today for youthful errors made when we were youths.

5. If the Corinthian Christians were carnal, were they still Christians and were they still saved? Was this division problem a “salvation issue”? “Salvation issue” is a popular phrase today. What does it mean to you?

- If by “salvation issue” we mean was it serious enough that it could eventually lead to a loss of salvation, the answer is “yes”. Any sin has an impact on salvation, but not every sin condemns us immediately to hell.
- Paul has affirmed their spiritual identity in 1:2 and still calls them “brethren.” They were still saved Christians, but they needed to quit thinking as carnal people would (i.e., non-Christians), and think more as truly spiritual people would.
- Failure to become spiritual could, and eventually would, cause them to be lost. If that were not a possibility, there was no need for Paul to be concerned.

6. In what way(s) does Paul’s description of his readers in 1 Cor. 1:2 serve as a foundation for the indictment of 3:1-4? What are the advantages and disadvantages of focusing on what we should do as opposed to who we are?

- Paul wants more than just “doing” better. He wants them to realize who they are (i.e., sanctified members of the Body of Christ as in 1:2), and then live lives that were consistent with that identity (3:1-4).
- Paul wants his readers to realize that by accepting Christ they had done more than change religious groups. They had taken on a new identity that no longer lived according to worldly ways and goals.

1 Cor 3:5-15, Two analogies

Paul now uses two analogies to illustrate the outcome of embracing the ways of God and renouncing the ways of the world. This change will affect our relationships with each other. It will lead us to value salvation-related goals more highly than earthly rank and prestige.

3:5-9b, Farming analogy

7. On the “ladder of importance” in God’s kingdom, where were Paul and Apollos? How was the division in the congregation a matter of failing to understand the spiritual nature of the church?

- Every Christian has one or more opportunities (gifts) to serve in the church, and different Christians have different tasks (e.g., planting or watering), but all are equally servants. “Ministers” (NKJV) or “servants” (ESV) is from the Greek word *diakonos*, which obviously, when transliterated, gives us our word “deacon,” but actually means one who serves.
- By becoming “followers” of certain preachers (with or without their approval), and dividing the church along those lines, the Corinthians were elevating these men in a way that was common in the world but was totally unacceptable among spiritually mature Christians. This is exactly what Jesus had warned against in Matthew 23:6-11; Mark 10:42-45.

3:9c-15, Building analogy

Paul's Progression

I laid a foundation.

Others build on it.

They should be careful how they build.

Christ is the only valid foundation.

8. To what building is Paul referring in verse 9?

- The church at Corinth. In the context of this passage, that is the only meaning where Paul can claim to have laid the foundation (v. 10). It can't be the church at large.

9. If a congregation was built following the "natural" things of chapter 2, would that be a case of inferior construction methods (3:12) or a different foundation (3:11)?

- A carnal, man-made foundation would not be the same as the foundation Paul laid (2:2). A "natural" building would have a different foundation and a different concept of the type of building being constructed. These differences might or might not lead to using different methods, but Paul is concerned less with methods and more with the very nature of God's kingdom.

10. How could someone build poorly on the foundation, see his work destroyed or fail, and still be saved? How would Paul have felt to know that at some point in history, the congregations he started would cease to exist?

- We all make mistakes in how we serve the church. Some of our practical ideas or methods don't work well. We will not be lost because of those mistakes. The foundation must be the message of Christ. But Paul goes on and asserts that God would destroy those who divide the church or who teach destructive false doctrines (3:17).
- Paul's ministry was spent laying the foundation (i.e., starting congregations) by preaching Christ crucified. Afterwards, he was always deeply concerned about how those congregations fared, but he was not responsible for errors of judgment that may have had a negative impact on those churches after his work was finished.
- Think of missionaries who spend years sowing the seed and starting congregations, but then return to the USA only to see those congregations decline and die 20 or 30 years later. They suffer deeply from such developments, but will not be condemned in final judgment for these "failures."

1 Corinthians 3:16-17, The Temple

11. What does it mean in this passage to destroy or defile the temple?

(a) Abuse one's body (b) Divide the congregation (c) Litter the church building

- Answer: b

Note: Defile and destroy in verse 17 are from the same Greek word. Check different translations to see how they treat the two words.

12. What is the temple in each of these passages? Is it the entire worldwide church, the local congregation or the individual Christian?

- **1 Cor 3:16-17** _____ Local congregation
- **1 Cor 6:19** _____ The individual
Christian, but one who is a part of the church or congregation.
- **2 Cor 6:16** _____ Local congregation
and/or the church. The quote from Jeremiah 31:33 more likely refers to the church as a whole since it is made up of the plural “they.”
- **Eph 2:21** _____ The entire church
- The various passages with “you are the temple” analogies don’t necessarily mean the same. In 1 Corinthians 6:19 the temple is the body of the individual Christian who is to “flee immorality.”
- In 1 Cor 3, Paul equates harming the local congregation (which is part of the larger church universal) as defiling the temple of God.
- In the end, each Christian has a responsibility to preserve his own purity, which in turn affects the purity and unity of the congregation and the worldwide church (e.g., 5:1ff). If we do spiritual harm to the smallest element, we harm the whole.

13. What would happen to the one who destroyed the temple as compared to the one who built with inferior materials?

- Destroying the temple would bring personal destruction (condemnation), while poor building might produce great personal anguish on earth, but not eternal condemnation.
- Throughout this letter (and others), Paul treats behavior that harms the local congregation as a spiritual matter of great and eternal importance.

14. What role did a temple play in the life of those who worshiped its god? What does the temple analogy tell us about the role of the church in a Christian’s life, and our responsibilities toward the church?

- Temples played a central and unifying role. This was especially true of the Old Testament temple of Israel.
- Christians who are not thinking in a worldly way will take great care of the “temple” and will cherish his/her association with the church. To harm or neglect this temple is to be carnal and of this world.