

Three Analogies for a Healthy, Unified Church (1 Corinthians 3:1-17)

Expository Lessons from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

I. Review from Prior Lessons

- a. Paul was writing to the Corinthian church, addressing a number of problems that he was aware of and also answering questions they had raised to him.
- b. Corinth was a wealthy and decadent pagan city, in Achaia (southern part of Greece).
- c. Many of the things Paul states in this letter, while consistent with the teachings of other apostles and Jesus, were profoundly counter-cultural in Corinth and in the ancient Roman world.
- d. The very first problem Paul addressed was that of division in the church, based on factions forming with strong veneration of and loyalty to prominent teachers and apostles (with Paul, Peter and Apollos being mentioned by name).
 - i. "Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.'" (**1 Corinthians 1:12**, NKJV)
- e. Paul's arguments for why they must be unified under Christ rather than pursue a sectarian, divisive spirit and identify strongly with prominent leaders. His reasoning in rebuking their sectarian tendencies includes the following:
 - i. Christ is not divided.
 - ii. They were baptized into the name of Christ (not in the name of Paul, nor of other prominent leaders in the church).
 - iii. It was Christ (only) who was crucified for them.
 1. The message of the cross seems like foolishness to the world.
 2. The message of the cross goes to the heart of the gospel and reveals the wisdom of God in a *mystery* (something *hidden* that needed to be *revealed*).
 - iv. Identifying with prominent men, rather than with Christ, is unspiritual. It is following the 'wisdom' of this world (the Gentiles and their philosophies) rather than the wisdom of God.

- f. The subject of division within the church is the main subject from **1 Corinthians 1:10** through the end of **chapter 4**.

II. Introduction to 1 Corinthians 3:1-17

- a. The overall subject continues to be what it was in the prior passages: people are identifying with impressive church leaders more than they are identifying with Christ. This is creating disunity in the church in Corinth.
 - i. “Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’” (**1 Corinthians 1:12**, NKJV)
 - ii. Based on some of the things said in **1 Corinthians 1-4**, it appears (to me) that some of the Corinthians were judging and ranking the apostles and well-known leaders against each other and coming up with different ideas regarding which one was the best or most important.
 - iii. Paul considers that whole approach to be carnal and worldly.
- b. Paul has addressed this issue in the passages we previously covered, but here he builds on his prior arguments, using three analogies.
 - i. A baby who transitions from milk to solid food.
 - ii. A field of a farm, where one person plants the seeds, and another provides water.
 - iii. Construction of a building, where one lays the foundation and others construct the rest of the building on top of that.
 - 1. He expands on that analogy to say that the building (the church) is the “temple of God”.
- c. Read **1 Corinthians 3:1-17**.

III. First Analogy: a Baby Transitioning from Milk to Solid Food

- a. This may sound like an insult to the church from Paul. He says he fed them with milk, and they still are not ready for solid food. He considers them to be spiritual infants, immature, not yet able to transition to normal adult-type solid food.
- b. This passage reminds me of what it says in **Hebrews 5-6**:
 - i. “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who

partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, *not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.* And this we will do if God permits.” (**Hebrews 5:12-6:3**, NKJV)

- ii. There are “elementary/first principles” that someone needs to know when they first come to faith. This is like milk to a baby. However, as a person matures, he or she should be transitioning to solid food, going beyond the initial foundational teachings.
 - 1. As we bring unbelievers to the faith and help others to fill in gaps regarding foundational teachings they may have missed, we need to reflect on what are the foundational teachings, the “milk” that a person should be fed first, versus more advanced teachings they will need to receive later.
 - 2. **Question:** What would you consider to be the “elementary principles of the faith”, the spiritual foundation upon which everything else rests?
 - a. We will consider the answer to that question in connection with the third analogy in this lesson regarding building/construction.
- c. Here Paul, who planted the church in Corinth as recorded in **Acts 18:1-18**, is saying that in the past, he had provided “milk” to the disciples there, in their spiritual infancy.
 - i. Note that Apollos came to Corinth after Paul had departed, as described in **Acts 18:24-19:1**.
 - 1. Apollos was instructed by Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus, after which he went to Achaia and, specifically, to Corinth.

IV. **Second Analogy: a Farmer’s Field (where one plants the seeds and another waters the growing crop)**

- a. “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. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his

own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; *you are God's field*, you are God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:5-9, NKJV)

- b. Elements of the parable:
 - i. The field is the church.
 - ii. Paul is the one who planted the seeds, who did the first step (in planting the church in Corinth, initially).
 - iii. Apollos watered the crop, teaching more things to the church, thereby fulfilling the second step.
 - iv. There is no point in arguing which of them was more important.
- c. Both the planter and the waterer were vital. Both had a critical role to play. Both did the job they were given by God.
 - i. You might think that planting was the more important step. However, without water, a plant dies, no matter how well it was planted initially.
 1. Recently I left out in the sun some potted flower plants that I was planning to transplant into our front yard (which receives a lot of sun). I had planned to transplant them the prior evening, but unfortunately neglected to do so.
 2. I discovered they had wilted terribly, and were starting to die, just from being in the sun for a few hours with no water.
 3. Fortunately, after relocating them to a shady place and watering them extensively, they were able to revive after a few hours. However, it served as a reminder to me how critical it is to water plants!
 4. **Lesson:** Regardless of how good a job you do in planting a plant (or converting and baptizing a new disciple of Christ), if you don't continue to provide life-giving water regularly, *it will die!*
 - ii. We in New England are in a water-rich part of the world. However, in much of the world (like the Middle East), water is in short supply. In places like that, people are much more aware of how critical water is to sustain life.
- d. God was the one who brought about the miracle, who "gave the increase" in making the crops grow.

- i. Paul even says, "...neither he who plants nor he who waters... *is anything*"!
 - ii. He is genuinely humble, acknowledging that men like himself and Apollos are simply *servants and ministers of God*, doing the job that they were entrusted with.
- e. Paul reminds us that *God* will be the one who rewards each of the workers (Paul and Apollos) "according to his own labor".
 - i. It is not our job to evaluate and "reward" the church leaders against each other.
 - ii. God will take care of that in the end.
- f. **Application:** We do not need to rank ourselves against each other, nor attempt to evaluate and rank others, including missionaries, church leaders, teachers, etc.
 - i. Paul condemns this mindset of comparing Christians in this way as being *carnal* (of the flesh, unspiritual). He says it results in envy, strife and divisions in the church.
- g. A unified "one".
 - i. "Now he who plants and he who waters *are one*...." (**1 Corinthians 3:8**, NKJV)
 - ii. **Question:** When Paul makes this statement that the one who plants (Paul) and the one who waters (Apollos) "*are one*", what does that mean?
 1. Does he mean that he and Apollos are the same person? (Obviously not!)
 2. He means they are a 'unified one', not a singular one. They are most definitely not the same person!
 - iii. The ancient heresy of 'modalism' is still around today, when people (incorrectly) try to explain the divinity of the Son of God and the relationship between the Father and the Son.
 1. Under 'modalism', people claim (incorrectly) that the Father and Son are the same person. They say that the Father somehow became the Son.
 2. A bad analogy I have sometimes heard people use in trying to explain the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is liquid water/ice/steam. However, since all three

represent changed forms of the same thing (water), one of the forms can change into another. That suggests an (incorrect) modalism-type understanding of the trinity.

3. (For the view of the Father/Son/Spirit relationship and more useful analogies used by early Christians, see: *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Trinity'.)
- iv. Early Christian writer Novatian, a Roman elder writing c. 255 AD, used this passage to shed some light on an important statement Jesus made in the gospels.
 1. "But since they frequently urge upon us the passage where it is said, 'I and the Father are one', (**John 10:30**) in this also we shall overcome them with equal facility. For if, as the heretics think, Christ were the Father, He ought to have said, 'I and the Father are one.' But when He says 'I', and afterwards introduces the Father by saying, 'I and the Father,' He severs and distinguishes the peculiarity of His, that is, the Son's person, from the paternal authority, not only in respect of the sound of the name, but moreover in respect of the order of the distribution of power, since He might have said, 'I the Father,' if He had had it in mind that He Himself was the Father.
 2. "And since He said 'one' thing, let the heretics understand that He did not say 'one' person. For 'one' placed in the neuter, intimates the social concord, not the personal unity. He is said to be one neuter, not one masculine, because the expression is not referred to the number, but it is declared with reference to the association of another.
 3. "Finally, He adds, and says, 'We are,' not 'I am,' so as to show, by the fact of His saying 'I and the Father are,' that they are *two persons*. Moreover, that He says one, has reference to the agreement, and to the identity of judgment, and to the loving association itself, as reasonably the Father and Son are one in agreement, in love, and in affection; and because He is of the Father, whatsoever He is, He is the Son; the distinction however remaining, that He is not the Father who is the Son, because He is not the Son who is the Father. For He would not have added 'We are,' if He had had it in mind that He, the only and sole Father, had become the Son.
 4. "In fine, the Apostle Paul also apprehended this agreement of unity, with the distinction of persons notwithstanding: for in writing to the Corinthians he said, 'I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. Therefore neither is he

that plants anything, nor he that waters, but God who gives the increase. Now *he that plants and he that waters are one.*' (**1 Corinthians 3:6-8**)

5. "And who does not perceive that Apollos is one person and Paul another, and that Apollos and Paul are *not one and the same person*? Moreover, also, the offices mentioned of each one of them are different; for one is he who plants, and another he who waters. The Apostle Paul, however, put forward these two not as being one person, but as being 'one;' so that although Apollos indeed is one, and Paul another, so far as respects the distinction of persons, yet as far as respects their agreement both are 'one.'
6. "For when two persons have one judgment, one truth, one faith, one and the same religion, one fear of God also, they are one even although they are two persons: they are the same, in that they have the same mind. Since those whom the consideration of person divides from one another, these same again are brought together as one by the consideration of religion. And although they are not actually the self-same people, yet in feeling the same, they are the same; and although they are two, are still one, as having an association in faith, even although they bear diversity in persons."
 - a. (Source: Novatian, *A Treatise Concerning the Trinity*, chapter 27; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, pp. 637–638)
 - b. Points made by Novatian include:
 - i. When Jesus said "I and the Father are one" he did not mean that He was the same person as the Father (the heresy of modalism).
 - ii. This is the same exact language Paul used in **1 Corinthians 3**, where he said that the one who planted (Paul) and the one who watered (Apollos) "are one". Clearly there everyone understands that they are a unified one, not the same person!
 - iii. Novatian argues that the "one" here in Greek is *neuter* rather than in the masculine gender. Therefore, it indicates a *unity of association* rather than the same identity.

- iv. (Note that in Greek, unlike in English, there are three genders, and nine different words, based on gender and case, that all are translated “one” in English. For example, in the famous statement in **Ephesians 4:5** “one Lord, one faith, one baptism...”, there are *three different Greek words* used for ‘one’, since “Lord” is masculine, “faith” is feminine, and “baptism” is neuter!)
- v. In both the **John 10:30** and **1 Corinthians 3:8** passages, the Greek word for “one” (*en* or *hen* / ἓν) is in the neuter, as Novatian points out.
- vi. This also can help us appreciate the kind of unity that Jesus wants us to have: to be unified just as He and His Father are unified (**John 17:11, 17:22**).

V. **Third Analogy: Construction of a Building (the Temple of God).**

- a. The building refers to the church.
 - i. “For we are God’s fellow workers...you are God’s building.” (**1 Corinthians 3:9**)
- b. Paul is a ‘master builder’ who laid the foundation of the church in Corinth.
 - i. “...so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man’s foundation....” (**Romans 15:19–20**, NKJV)
 - ii. Paul preferred to preach Christ where no one had done so before, so that he would not be “building on another man’s foundation”.
 - iii. Paul was a “master builder” (the Greek word found here is the same word from which our English word ‘architect’ comes). However, his specialty was *foundation work*.
 1. In engineering and construction, in my career, I have become very familiar with the different specialties in the construction of a structure, and how each plays a part, and each one comes in at a specific time.
 2. Demolition, excavation and foundation work comes first.
 3. Most people only think about foundations when they are found to be defective. While foundations are typically out of sight,

however, poor foundations can *lead to noticeable problems elsewhere in the building* over time.

- a. Recall that Jesus, who also was in the construction trades as a carpenter, was familiar with the importance of foundations, as seen in the examples he used in **Matthew 7:24-25** and **Luke 6:47-49**.
- b. **Personal Example:** I live in a 100+ year old 2-family house, where a few years ago I noticed that a glass window on the second-floor porch had become cracked and out of square. At the time I was trying to repair the window, I did not recognize the root cause of the problem. Years later, I was working in the crawl space below the porch and realized that the foundation was rotted and sagging. That is what had caused the uneven settling, which ended up throwing the porch window out of alignment!
- c. Often problems in the foundation (which are more difficult to see) cause problems elsewhere in the building, where they are more noticeable.
- d. It is challenging to fix a foundation problem after the building has been constructed (and is resting on that foundation).
 - i. However, I have had to do that personally (with my home) as well as professionally (as a civil engineer rehabilitating existing infrastructure).
 - ii. However, while foundation repair is not easy, it is not impossible!
- iv. Paul laid the foundation; others (like Apollos) had built upon it. Now Paul, the “master builder,” was coming back to check on the building he started. There are a few “punch list” items to be fixed!
 1. I have seen this in many churches and with many Christians. As you dig into their understanding of the Gospel, you discover that they never received a good, solid spiritual foundation. As a result, there are problems in their spiritual walk with the Lord and how they understand the faith.
- v. **Question:** What was “the foundation” that Paul laid in Corinth and elsewhere? Where would you look to find that?

1. “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (**1 Corinthians 3:11**, NKJV)
2. “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.” (**1 Corinthians 15:1-8**, NKJV)
 - a. Paul reminded them that their spiritual foundation was *the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus on the third day* as historical fact.
 - i. Either it happened, or it did not.
 - ii. This is not complicated; it is the foundation of the faith.
 - b. This was proven by the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.
 - c. This also was confirmed by reliable eyewitnesses who testified to these events. Furthermore, they spread this story around the world in the face of torture, persecution and death.
 - d. *This is the reliable foundation.*
 - i. Their foundation was NOT “you will have a wonderful family and great life if you follow Jesus”.
 1. Paul reminded them: “To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all

things until now.” (**1 Corinthians 4:11-13**, NKJV)

2. Jesus said: “Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” (**Luke 12:51-53**, NKJV)
- ii. Their foundation was NOT some promise that they would have (from the church) a perfect family of loving, accepting people of the highest moral character, who would never abuse or harm them. Instead, Jesus and Paul promised there would be significant problems (including a lack of love and false teachers) in the church.
1. From Jesus: “Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because *lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold*. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” (**Matthew 24:11-14**, NKJV)
 2. Paul warned the Ephesian elders: “For I know this, that after my departure *savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves*. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” (**Acts 20:29-31**, NKJV)

- i. Paul identifies this “building” that he has laid the foundation of, the church.
 1. “Do you not know that *you are the temple of God* and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, *which temple you are.*” (**1 Corinthians 3:16–17**, NKJV)
- ii. In other passages the church is described using similar language.
 1. “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the 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, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” (**Ephesians 2:19–22**, NKJV)
 2. “Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion A chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.’” (**1 Peter 2:4–6**, NKJV; quoting **Isaiah 28:16** from the LXX)
 3. See also **2 Timothy 2:20-21**.
 4. See also **Hebrews 3:1-6** and **10:19-25**, where Jesus is portrayed as the faithful High Priest over the “house of God”, the church. That is alluding to the prophecy in **1 Samuel 2:35** (designated **1 Kingdoms 2:35** in the LXX), where it says that the Lord will “raise up” a *faithful priest* who will be over *His faithful house*.
- iii. The picture of the temple of God in the Old Testament:
 1. Large, expensive stones were fitted together onsite. Read **1 Kings 6:1-4** and **6:11** (designated **3 Kingdoms** in LXX).
 - a. Costly stones.
 - b. They were finished (squared off with tools) at the quarry, then fitted together (with no iron tools used to trim them) at the temple site.

- c. This is a picture of us being fitted together perfectly, as valuable stones, to form something great.
 - 2. The temple was the visible sign on earth of the unseen God.
 - 3. It was the focal point for prayer, available to those from all nations, even foreigners (**1 Kings 8**; designated **3 Kingdoms 8:10** in the LXX)
 - a. Consider also **Exodus 40:34-35** when the tabernacle was set up.
 - 4. The glory of the Lord (the cloud representing the Holy Spirit) filled the house. (**1 Kings 8:10**; designated **3 Kingdoms 8:10** in the LXX)
- iv. A great, sobering warning.
 - 1. "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are." (**1 Corinthians 3:17**, NKJV)
 - 2. The church is to be a holy temple to God.
 - 3. God will personally destroy anyone who defiles His temple!
- e. **Challenges:**
 - i. Check your own spiritual foundation.
 - 1. **Question:** Is the foundation of your faith based on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the third day, as historical fact?
 - a. If not, get help in repairing your foundation.
 - b. Build your faith on a foundation *that cannot be shaken*.
 - ii. Seek to become an expert builder. Study how Paul laid the foundation. Gain insights from reading examples such as those provided in
 - 1. **Acts 13** (in Pisidian Antioch),
 - 2. **Acts 17** (in Athens),
 - 3. **Acts 26** (Jesus' commissioning of Paul) and
 - 4. **Acts 28** (Paul preaching the kingdom of God in Rome).
 - 5. Also, gain more insights and clues from Paul's letters.

- iii. See the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:18-20**) as a command *in two parts*:
 1. The two parts are:
 - a. laying a foundation of faith in Christ, and then
 - b. building on that foundation (teaching others to obey everything Jesus commanded).
 2. Seek to become an expert builder in either or both of these 'trades'.
- iv. Recognize in the Old Testament temple a foreshadowing of the church.
 1. A center of prayer.
 2. We are the costly stones that are fitted together, perfectly unified for a common purpose to glorify God. We are separate stones, but unified as one.
 3. The Spirit is in (or *in the midst of*) us.
 4. Finally, remember Paul's warning: "Don't defile the temple of God, or He will destroy you!"