

Building and Being Built

Our role in what God is doing

Paul often writes about one of his central themes, the building up of the Church, the 'Body of Christ'. Let's look at two passages where he goes into a little detail, **1 Corinthians 3:9-17** and **Colossians 2:6-23**.

He has clear teaching here for two groups of people: those who are in Christ and are being 'built', and those who are doing the 'building'. In the Church, everyone is being built and some are also involved in the building process.

In most 'churches', however, there is a third group:— those who are not (yet) joined to Jesus, but are coming to meetings for various reasons. For their sake and everybody else's, these folk need to know that they not yet part of the Church, though they are very welcome to join in wherever they can. But there is an important 'divide'. Only those who are IN Christ can GROW in Christ, and only those who are in Christ can be joined together in real Church life.

The life of our 'churches' may be largely social, but the life of the Church is basically spiritual, solidly built on relationship with our Father God through the Lord Jesus Christ. That does not mean there is NO social life in the Church, simply that it is based on spiritual reality.

These two different approaches are right at the heart of what Paul has to say in these two passages . . .

In **1 Corinthians 3:9-17**, Paul writes about how those who are 'God's fellow workers' (in helping to build the Church) need to go about their task.

1. By the grace of God (v. 10). Paul is very conscious of his own need of God's grace. This is not just when he feels weak and helpless but (perhaps especially) when he might otherwise tend to rely on his own abilities. He was a very well educated man, with many natural abilities, and it would have been easy for him to say, 'I can do this' when he thought of proclaiming the message and establishing churches. No doubt he could have organised the whole thing brilliantly! But he chose instead to rely on God's provision in his life. See **1 Corinthians 1:17-25, 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, 12:7-10**.

2. Only one foundation (v. 10 & 11). No question here. Paul calls the church 'God's building', using a word that includes the purpose of that building – as a dwelling, somewhere for him to be at home. How could he

be 'at home', how could he live in a 'building' that was not based solidly on the Lord Jesus? Paul is not talking about physical buildings here, of course, but the Church, made up of 'living stones', each individual who is joined to Jesus by the response of faith. (See **1 Peter 2:1-5, Ephesians 2:19-22**). He had made sure that he had laid that foundation solidly when he was in Corinth. Apollos had been there since, and maybe Peter and some others. They all had to be careful to build on the foundation of new life in Jesus, not on anything else. If we are God's 'fellow workers', what foundation do we rely on when we are building? Do we assume that people are in Christ, or make sure first? And then how do we build on that foundation?

3. Using the right materials (12-15). We may have thought of this passage as being about our 'life's work', all the things we do in our lifetime, but it is actually about the way we go about building the Church.

Paul writes about six building materials, from most expensive to cheapest: gold, silver, precious (or 'costly') stones, wood, hay and straw (or 'stubble'). The first three are fireproof, but not the last three. Some ways of building, says Paul, may look good but will not survive the test of fire. Even some apparently solid buildings will collapse when burned. The difference is plain if we look at the materials used . . .

Straw is basically a waste product from growing grain. It is useful, and has a value, but I have never heard of a farmer growing a crop just for the straw. He wants the grain, and then will use the straw or sell it.

Hay is rather different. This is a valuable crop, and needs good soil and proper preparation and harvesting. Poor preparation or a poor season can ruin the crop.

Wood is much more durable, but takes much longer to grow. Many good and solid houses have been built of it, but fire is their chief enemy.

We know that all these three have one thing in common: they burn. But there is another link between them: if we want more of them, we can produce it. It may take a longer or shorter time, but we can produce wood, hay or straw where there was none before. There is no real limit on how much we can produce.

Gold, silver and precious stones are different. We cannot go and make some more if we need it. All we can do is go and find some. There is a finite amount of each of them in the earth. We may not have found it all yet, but it was all there from the beginning of history.

I have taken some time to look at this because there is a strong picture here. How are we going to build the Church, based on the foundation of Jesus in each one's life? Will we use natural man-made resources which we can replenish with a little time, effort and expenditure? Or will we determine by the grace of God only to use the resources which he provides? In practical terms, are we going to be content to build a superstructure of meetings and routines into someone's life as soon as they have committed their life to Jesus? Or will we aim at real spiritual growth? More worrying still, do we ourselves think that attendance at meetings is the sum total and measure of spiritual growth?

How to do it? Paul knew there was a lot more to establishing the Church than just evangelism and then various meetings. He poured his life passionately into seeing every single believer grow up into full maturity in Christ. His approach was based on the message of Jesus, applied and taught individually, and he looked forward to presenting each one to his Lord. (See **Colossians 1:24-29**)

Colossians 2:6-23 is directed to the believers in the Church in Colossae. They faced the same problem – from the other side. Having come to a real life-changing knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, they were faced with some persuasive alternative approaches. Paul knew they could be blown off course and gave them some clear guidelines for growth . . .

1. In the same way you started (v. 6-7). He points them back to how they started out in Christ, by faith. That faith was based on hearing the message, giving them a revelation of God's plan for them in Jesus. (See **Romans 10:6-17**). Now, he says, go deeper and become firmly rooted in Jesus, established in your faith. Key to that process will be receiving good teaching. The result is not some dull, routine religion, but something that bubbles over with thanks to God for all that he has done and goes on doing!

2. Beware man-made religion! (v. 8-23). This was a problem in Paul's time, and remains one now. Apparently biblical doctrine is no guarantee of escape. There are plenty of man-made systems operating within Christian circles, all trying to get us to follow their particular emphasis and practices, urging their special brand of conformity on us. In the first century AD, one major problem was 'Judaisers' who tried to make Christian believers follow Jewish laws and traditions, loading them with guilt and legalism, even self-humiliation and worshipping angels! I have not heard of anyone recently who advocates angel-worship, but all the others are still very much in evidence, with other man-made laws and traditions in place of the Jewish ones! This is the way the world system works, not God's way.

Once again, like the ‘temporary structures’ of **1 Corinthians 3**, these things often look great and impressive but are of no value at all (v. 23).

3. Joined to Jesus and getting all you need from him (v. 9-20). As Paul sounds out the dangers of man-made religion, he ‘rubbishes’ it as he goes along. “Don’t give in to all this”, he says, “because **you have already got so much more in Jesus.**” (v. 9-10) And then he simply can’t hold back . . . “your old life is dead and buried, your ‘resurrection’ life has started, your ‘debt’ to keep the law, which would keep you under condemnation, has been cancelled by Jesus’ death. Even the spiritual powers that determine how the world system works, Jesus has rid himself (and therefore you) of them like an old piece of clothing, taken off and thrown away. The triumph over all these things was sealed by Jesus’ resurrection.”

Paul’s purpose in all this is to help bring the Colossians to a fresh and deeper appreciation of all that God has done for them in Jesus. He is providing them with a taste of exactly what they need. They need to go on getting teaching like this, opening out their inheritance in Jesus.

The remedy against all the distracting systems is to ‘hold fast to the head’ (i.e. Jesus himself). From him the whole body grows. Here again Paul’s message is ‘joined-up’. It is the Body of Christ, the Church, that is the means of its own growth. As each part functions properly, it contributes to the growth of the whole. Again the emphasis is **spiritual growth**. See **Colossians 1:9-12** and **Ephesians 4:11-16**. Here we can see how the ‘builders’ are all part of the complete process that our Father has put in place to build us up, individually and together.

Building and being built . . .

God’s way or man’s way?

Spiritual or natural?

Eternal or temporary?

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