

I Surrender All?

Reading 1 Corinthians 3 Properly

¹Cor 3:1 But I, brothers, could not address you as **spiritual** people, but as people of the **flesh**, as **infants** in Christ. ²I fed you with **milk**, not **solid food**, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for you are still of the flesh (“**fleshly**”). For **while there is jealousy and strife** among you, are you not of the flesh (“**fleshly**”) and behaving only in a human way? ⁴For when one says, “I follow **Paul**,” and another, “I follow **Apollos**,” are you not being merely human?

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I **planted**, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.

¹⁰According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I **laid a foundation**, and someone else is building upon it. **Let each one** take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁶Do you not know that you are **God’s temple** and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

¹⁸Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a **fool** that he may become **wise**. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “**He catches the wise in their craftiness**,” ²⁰and again, “**The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are**

futile.” ²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.

1 Corinthians 3:1-23

I Surrender All?

In 1896 Judson W. Van DeVenter, a man with a great Dutch name, but not so great theology, wrote one of the most famous hymns of all time. After struggling for five years with the inner turmoil of whether he should leave his successful career in art education for full time evangelistic work, he wrote the following lyrics:

*All to Jesus I surrender
All to Him I freely give
I will ever love and trust Him
In His presence daily live.
I surrender all, I surrender all
All to Thee my blessed Savior
I surrender all*

Himself a Methodist Episcopal, his song has been used by numerous evangelists to excite people into making a decision for Jesus—be it the first one or that second (or third, fourth, fifth, hundredth, thousandth, etc.) great decision to finally put Jesus on [the throne of their life](#).

“[I surrender all](#).” This is language that was later adopted by “[Higher Life](#),” [Holiness](#), [Keswick](#), and “[Carnal Christian](#)” Christianity. The idea behind all of these is that there are [two classes or kinds of Christians](#): the “carnal” (who live after the flesh) and the “spiritual” (who have entered the Higher Life / second blessing / full surrender / Spirit-filled life). Bill Bright, the famous evangelist who founded the Campus Crusade for Christ (now CRU) and wrote the famous evangelistic tract: *The Four Spiritual Laws*, perhaps popularized this idea more than any other in our day.

In his little tract called [The Spirit-Filled Life](#)¹ he begins, “[Every day can be an exciting adventure for the Christian who knows the reality of being filled with the Holy Spirit and who lives constantly, moment by moment, under His gracious direction](#).” Sounds great! But then he continues, by naming three kinds of people. The “[Natural Person](#),” he

¹ All summaries, quotes, and images from Dr. [Bill Bright](#) (1921-2003), “[Have You Made the Wonderful Discovery of the Spirit-Filled Life?](#)” [Cru.org](#).

says, is someone who has not received Christ. Self is on the throne, directing decisions and actions, often resulting in frustration. Jesus is on outside the life (left picture). He cites **1 Corinthians 2:14** as the proof-text.



Natural Person
(Self-Directed Life)



Spiritual Person
(Christ-Directed life)



Carnal Person
(Self-Directed Life)

The “**Spiritual Person**” he says is the one directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit (middle picture). Jesus is in the life *and on the throne*. Self is yielding to Jesus. They are Christ-centered, empowered by the Holy Spirit, introduce others to Christ, have an effective prayer life, understand God’s Word, trust and obey God, and experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, goodness and self-control. He cites **1 Corinthians 2:15-16** as the proof-text.

But there is a **third person**. This is the “**Carnal Person**.” This person has received Christ, but they live in defeat because they are trying to live the Christian life “**in their own strength**” (right picture). Jesus is in the life *but not on the throne*. Self is on the throne. This person has unbelief, disobedience, a poor prayer life, no desire for Bible study, is legalistic and has a critical spirit, has impure thoughts, jealousy and guilt, they are frustrated and aimless, they worry and are discouraged, they have a loss of love for God and others. He cites **1 Corinthians 3:1-3** as the proof-text.

1 Corinthians 3 Its Structure and Context

1 Corinthians 3 **begins in earnest the corrections and rebukes** in this letter, several of which have been **badly misunderstood** by many Christians over the years, the first of which appear today. It comes on the heels of two mini-sermons on the cross (**1Cor 1:17-2:2; 2:3-16**). Those, in turn, were **the theological grounding** of this entire letter, a letter which began by addressing the quarreling and divisions that were arising in this church that were occurring because these Christians were becoming **groupies** (**1:10-17**). Remember that word? **A groupie** is a passionate fan who follows a music

band, celebrity, or public figure from place to place on tour in hopes of meeting them, gaining personal access, or forming a close personal or intimate relationship.

In this case, **they had already met** at least some of their “celebrities,” men like Paul and Apollos, perhaps even Peter. But now they were forming factions, like Jr. High boys used to do when they would wear their favorite metal-band tee-shirt, carve their logo into the bathroom stall with a knife, and then fight each other over who was the best at recess (ah, the 80s). Only this problem in Corinth was much more serious than a playground fight.

In Ch. 3, Paul returns to this **factionalism** as his theology of the cross homilies become the chiastic theological center and grounding of his addressing their moral failures. He hasn’t fully addressed the factionalism, so he begins by returning to it here:

The Cross and Christian Unity (1:10–4:16)

A. The Problem: **Divisions**, Baptism and the Cross (1:10-16)

B. The **Wisdom** and Power **of God**: The **Cross** (1:17–2:2)

B’. The **Wisdom of God**: Revealed Through the **Spirit** (2:3-16)

A’. **Christian Unity**: *Paul, Apollos and Cephas as One* (3:1–4:16)²

² This is **Kenneth Bailey’s** (*Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*) of the first four chapters, see p. 120.

1 Corinthians 3 forms a nice unit for us which is also chiasmic, even though in some ways he continues on through Ch. 4. This is one of those times where the chiasm especially helps interpretation. For, many people have taken parts of this chapters completely out of context, causing great harm to Christian souls even though they may “mean well.” But the road to hell, as they say, is paved with good intentions. While these bad interpretations might not be quite that bad, they are nevertheless serious enough that we need to address them head on.

The structure is a similar four-part ABB'A' loop (see above) which has two consecutive metaphors forming the center of the broader argument about factionalism:

A. Paul & Apollos: *sarkikoi* (“fleshly”) and *anthrōpon* (“human/Adam”) (3:1-4)

B. The analogy of the field and the planters (3:5-9)

B'. The analogy of the temple and builders (3:10-17)

A'. Paul, Apollos, Cephas: *tō aiōni toutō* (“this age”) and Christ (Second Adam) (3:18–23)³

³ Bailey sees this same chiasm, though he continues it through 4:7, which I think takes it too far. I have relabeled much of it to show the eschatology, which he mostly misses. The [Biblical Chiasm Exchange](#) sees the same chiasm as well, but doesn't use theological labels. It is helpful, especially for the mini-structures within the larger one of ch. 3.

Why does this matter? Because the two consecutive analogies do two important things. **First**, they interpret *each other*. They are not “**strange, suddenly metaphorical shifts**” as Beale rightly explains, but are rather theologically tied together ultimately through the idea of **a garden-temple**.⁴ Along with “**planting**” in the first metaphor, the word “**human**” (*anthropos*) (**vv. 3, 4**) especially points us to **Adam** and the eschatology of the present age (**18**) which began with him, just as Paul will explicitly return to “Adam” and call Christ the “Second man” in the parallel in **Ch. 15:47** (cf. **22, 45**). **Second**, they keep the metaphors firmly within **the broader context of the factionalism**, and that forces us to read them in light of the context rather than our own theological preconceptions.

What all this means is that the argument of Chapter 3 is going to unfold in effectively **three stages**. These stages are eschatological. That is, they deal with time, particularly the time of Christ and the Holy Spirit rather than some kind of third human constitution (“carnal”). This continues what we saw in Ch. 2.

⁴ **Gregory K. Beale**, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 17, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL; England: InterVarsity Press; Apollos, 2004), 246-50.

1. You are still living as people of the old age.
2. Yet you are God's temple, where the Spirit of the age to come already dwells.
3. Therefore stop measuring everything by the old-age categories of human leaders and human status; you belong to Christ.

Two Kinds of Christians? (1 Corinthians 3:1-4)

Ch. 3 begins, “But I, *brothers*, could not address you as **spiritual** people, but as people of the **flesh**, as *infants in Christ*” (1Cor 3:1). From the very start of this chapter, this is the place Bill Bright and many others run to in order to show **two different classes or kinds of Christians**. The first is the “**spiritual**” Christian; the second is the “**carnal**” Christian (which derives from the Latin *carnales* of the Greek *sarx*—“flesh”). Seems straight forward enough, right? Isn't that literally what we just read. Well, no, it isn't. In fact, Paul is not talking about kind or class at all. He is still talking about maturity, not identity, and how this present age in which we live differs from the age to come to which we now belong. They are *acting* like people of the flesh; not they *are* people of the flesh. Let's address these two terms.

We've seen “**spiritual**” at the end of Ch. 2. “*The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no*

one” (2:15). *Pneumatikois*, from the noun *pneuma* (spirit). This is an adjective. It describes *to whom* and *to what realm* we now rightly belong as Christians. How do we know this? Paul says so. We belong to Christ ... that’s how the chapter ends (23). The declaration in vs. 16 is parallel, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” The Spirit’s indwelling is the decisive reality, not your “surrendering.” Peter says the same exact thing, even using *Pneumatikois* with a temple, “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a *spiritual house*, to be a *holy priesthood*, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1Pet 2:5). I bring this up to show that he and Paul taught the very same thing; which gets *directly to the factionalism*, for these Corinthians were pitting Paul against Peter in our very passage (21).

“Flesh” is a word we’ve not seen yet in this form. We saw a similar word in Ch. 2—“Natural” (*psychikos*). We saw that the “natural” person was not a Christian (to which Bill Bright and others agree). We also saw the noun *sarx* used in 1:26, 29, though you might not know it from the ESV where it translates it first as “worldly” (“not many of you were wise according to worldly standards;” lit. *according to the*

flesh), then as “*human being*” (“so that no *human being* might boast...” lit. *so that no flesh*). So *sarx* is connected to acting worldly and “humanly.” The word in 1Cor 3:1 is again an adjective: *sarkinois*. I like the term “fleshly” rather than “people of the flesh,” because the ESV makes it sound too ontological for my taste. Thus, he speaks about “jealousy and strife” (3), a walking “in a human way” or “according to man” (3-4). This will be paralleled in vs. 18 with those who think they are “wise in this age.” (18), taking us right back to Ch. 2 and the eschatology of the “ages.”

This shift from a “natural” person to a “fleshly” person is deliberate, and I can see how, if you don’t read carefully, it could make you think this is a third category of person: non-Christian (“natural”), mature Christian (“spiritual” or “mature”), and carnal (“fleshly”). But look carefully at what it says. The verse begins by calling them “brothers.” These are Christians. There is no other category here. True, it ends saying they are “infants in Christ.” But infant Christians are still just Christians, they just haven’t grown up. The problem is maturity, not being a different kind of Christian.

Vs. 2 elaborates. “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet

ready.” What is the context of this? It has to do with how they are *living* in jealousy, competitively *walking* “according to men.” Vs. 3, “For you are still fleshly. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and behaving only *in a human way*?” “Human way” is identical with “fleshly way.” This is about their *behavior*, not about what they are as some kind of sub-class, lower-level Christian.

There is simply nothing here that creates a normal, recognized class of genuinely saved people who simply have not yet made the subsequent decision to surrender and be Spirit-filled, as if this is some kind of semi-permanent identity. Yet, this is taught by so many today.⁵ This is at the heart of the “**Lordship Salvation**” debate where one side says that a Christian can believe in Jesus but not yet make him the “Lord” of their life. It’s the same thing Bright is saying, just different terminology. No, friend. **You don’t make Jesus Lord. He is Lord.** And because he is Lord, and the Lord of all those he brings to himself, he simply *will be* the Lord of every

⁵ **Going Deeper:** It was also being taught 450 years ago. Dirk Philips (1504-68), a Dutch Anabaptist elder writing against an unnamed opponent (perhaps Lutheran, Spiritualist, or Radical Reformation) wrote, “Some persons wish to assert that the weak and young Christians are the carnal children of God and should be so called. But we say that one may not thus understand the words of the apostle.” The entire argument is worth reading. See **Dirk (Deitrich) Philips**, “**The Tabernacle of Moses**,” *Enchiridion, or Hand Book of the Christian Doctrine and Religion* (1564; English Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Co., 1910), 276-77.

Christian. This isn't optional. Jesus isn't impotent in his power to sanctify his people. This is true even though they keep on sinning. Justification and sanctification necessarily work together. There is no such thing as a Christian who is justified that God is not also working to sanctify, as if you can get your fire insurance and a "ticket to heaven," but not ever have a changed life with new desires and affections. The Lordship of Jesus touches all his people in their ongoing sanctification, precisely *because* he is Lord.

What Paul is doing is giving a **severe rebuke** of living out of step with one's true identity: *Christians*. Paul is exposing the eschatological, theological, and legal absurdity of people who are of the Spirit yet still conducting themselves as people of the world—"fleshly" or "in a human way." He obviously isn't saying this is impossible. The Corinthians are doing that very thing. He is saying it is *absurd*. So, he takes it right back to the early verses of Ch. 1 to demonstrate: "**For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human**" (3:4).

"**Merely human?**" That means *behaving* like *non-Christians*. He doesn't treat them as unbelievers, but as believers. He isn't judging anyone's individual salvation here. But he is

clearly calling them to look inside and see exactly where their affections truly lie. Is it on the side of fighting, quarreling, jealousy, acting superior, being admired? Or is it on the side of the foolishness of the wisdom of the cross? Only the individual can answer that, and for some of them, it might mean they aren't saved at all.

The link is [directly back to Adam](#), the first “*human*.” The first use of this word in the LXX (which Paul has just previously quoted in [2:16](#)) is [Gen 1:26](#), “Let us make man (*anthropon*) according to our image...” It appears several times in [Gen 2](#) (vs. 5’s “no man to work the ground;” 7’s “the *man* became a living soul;” 8’s “he placed there the *man*;” 15’s “the LORD God took the *man*;” 18’s “it is not good that the *man* should be alone;” and 24’s “*man* shall leave his father and mother”). Adam, who is the first man, becomes characterized by sin, death, and the temptation of the devil (Gen 3:1ff). This “[Adamic](#)” or [human pattern](#) is not some kind of sub-Christian category; it is a *non*-Christian category—yet a category all humans continue to share in this present evil age.

Go back to the [milk](#) comment in [vs. 2](#). He refers to feeding them milk while he was with them (see [2:1](#); [3:6](#); etc.), rather than solid food. The “milk” to which he refers is very

clearly the scandal of the cross, the only thing he chose to know among them for this very reason—their immaturity, not packaged in sophisticated rhetorical and philosophical wrapping which they craved.

The solid food refers to the deeper wisdom of God that belongs to the mature, the wisdom not of this age, the mind of Christ that judges all things properly.⁶ They *aren't* judging pretty much anything properly as their rivalries, sexual perversion, lawsuits, idol-meat, hair problems, Supper problems, worship, and lack of love all so evidently demonstrate. But there is deep irony in this statement (not sarcasm, but the ironic cousin), because even though they aren't ready for it, pretty much everything they are about to be told is going to be force-fed to them as solid food anyway. He does not wait until they reach some higher tier; he force-

⁶ **Going Deeper.** It is tempting, as stated long ago by Severian of Gabala (355-425 AD) the archenemy of Chrysostom), to think of milk and meat thusly: “By ‘milk’ Paul means moral teaching and miracles. Solid food, by contrast, is the proclamation of the doctrines of God.” (Severian of Gabala, *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*; in Gerald Lewis Bray, *1-2 Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 7 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999], 27–28). Generally speaking, I think this is exactly backwards. Based on the formal logic of all of Paul's letters, the “milk,” if anything, if the basic theology of the Christian faith (see Heb 5:12; 6:1). The “meat” would be the ethical doctrines that always come after. In the context of both Hebrews and 1 Corinthians, this holds up better than Gabala's view—which is the common view even today. But I've put it a little more specifically according to the context of 1 Cor 3 above.

feeds them what their condition requires. They must understand exactly what their factionalism truly is: *walking according to the pattern of this world*, rather than the world to come. That's what it means to walk in the flesh. It doesn't mean you are a low-class Christian. It means you are a Christian behaving like someone who isn't a Christian at all.

Two Related Metaphors

At just this point, there are always **a few who will deeply introspect** at these comments, see their sin, and say, “**I guess I'm not a Christian.**” Perhaps that's part of the whole “carnal Christian” theology temptation. It creates a safe second category so that people can remain untransformed without questioning their own standing in Christ. Yet, even though the opposite was just said, the introspective person will hear in all this is, “**Well, I still sin, so if there are only two categories of people, then I must not be a Christian.**” Rather than the safe third category of the carnal Christian, this person collapses the categories in the other direction and questions their standing because transformation is incomplete. That's exactly and **entirely backwards** to what Paul is teaching. Again, he calls them “**brothers,**” not non-Christians. He

says they are **infants**, not stillborns. And even more remarkably, he is talking about the way they behave *around one another*—not their own private sin life—which at this moment he isn't talking about at all.

I bring that up, because this is precisely what people make this out to be, as we saw in Bright's list of what a carnal Christian looks like. It was **entirely self/individual sin oriented**. Remember: *unbelief, poor prayer life, no Bible study, critical spirit, impure thoughts, guilt, frustrated, aimless, worried, and discouraged*. Paul isn't talking about any of that! He is talking about sins against the unity of the church. So what he does now is give **two metaphors**—deeply related to one another—that when understood properly, actually prove the opposite of what the “Higher Life” people want you to believe.

The Metaphor of the Field (3:5-9)

He begins with the **metaphor of planting in a field** and brings the focus specifically on **himself and Apollos**, whom he has just mentioned in the previous verse and both of whom came up by name in Ch. 1. “**What then is Apollos? What is Paul?**” (**3:5**), reminding them of their factionalism.

His answer? “**Servants through whom you believed.**” Not celebrities. Servants. Servants of whom? Of Jesus. “... **as the Lord assigned to each.**” It was the Lord Jesus himself who assigned both Paul and Apollos to this church at Corinth. If that is true, then how could they be fighting over which one to follow? The answer is already apparent, but it is also not where he takes them.

Instead, two verses in a row give the same three ideas: *planting, watering, and growing*. “**I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth**” (6). “**I planted**” refers to Paul as the actual missionary who came to Corinth when there was no church. He first gave them the Gospel. “**Apollos watered,**” means that Apollos was with them after Paul left them to continue on his missionary journey. But what really matters? **Vs. 7**, “**So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.**” About 20 years ago, my uncle began a massive apple-orchard project at his property on the North Platte River up near Torrington, WY. He planted it over the course of many years. Each year he diligently waters and tends his orchard. Last year was a bumper crop. This year he didn’t get a single apple. This has happened many times, and as frustrating as it surely is,

he has learned how true Paul's statement is: God alone matters, for **God alone causes a thing to grow** or not.

Paul continues, “**He who plants and he who waters *are one*, and each will receive his wages according to his labor**” (8a). What's his point? They both work in the same field, on the same crop, for the same land-owner. Their labor might be different, and they will each receive what is due the labor they work, But **their labor is *not at odds***. Rather, it is in harmony. To think anything else would be insane. Yet, that's precisely how the Corinthians are acting. Now, I'm going to come back to this point that **each will receive his wages** in a moment, for it has a direct tie-in to the next metaphor.

For now, he ends this one with **vs. 9**, and it is very important. “**For we are God's fellow workers**.” Who is the “**we**?” He *and the Corinthians*? No! He and *Apollos*! “**You**,” the Corinthians, “**are God's field, God's building**” (9b). The metaphor is not primarily a diagnosis of the Corinthian's private spirituality; it is a redefinition of Paul and Apollos' labor among them.

An important key to properly understanding what we are about to hear is the end of **vs. 9** and what the Corinthians *are*. That's ontology language, language of essence, language of

existence. *They are God's field, God's building.* They are both. There is no “and” or “but,” no explanatory note. They are simply side-by-side. The reason? The two metaphors are deliberately woven together to be mutually interpretive of one another. They aren't carnal. They are this. The field metaphor is now completed. The building metaphor is about to begin. You'll see why this matters soon enough.

The Metaphor of the Temple (10-17)

The *second analogy* thus begins in vs. 10, “*According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it*” (10a). Do you understand what you've just read? Is the exact same thing he just talked about. This isn't about the Corinthians, much less about you or I. It is very specifically *about Paul and Apollos*. “*The grace of God given to me,*” refers to Paul being privileged by God to become the so-called Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul is the master builder who laid a foundation. That is, he proclaimed the gospel to these Corinthians. Someone else—that is Apollos (for now)—is building upon it.

He then gives a general warning to anyone who continues to build upon this foundation. “Let each one take care how he builds upon it” (10b). This is not referring to the general population of the church at Corinth, but to those who might have become deacons or elders or perhaps visiting pastors, i.e. those who further teach and shepherd the church at Corinth. That’s very important. This isn’t about them or you!

Vs. 11 explains just how the church of Jesus Christ, which we inherit today, functions. “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” Ephesians lays this out a little more clearly. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:19-20).

Paul, as an Apostle, was directly and immediately tasked by the living Christ as an Apostle—an eye-witness testimony of the risen Savior himself who knew the Lord personally—to lay the only foundation that is ever laid on any true Church. That’s the point of the Cross-message of Chs. 1-2. That’s the “milk.” Apollos could then water this, but he

was not allowed to raze that foundation to the ground and build up a new one in his own image. Anyone who does that is a usurper, not a builder. He is destroying the building, not raising it up.

This then becomes the context of one of the most badly misinterpreted passages in the entire Bible. “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” (1Cor 3:12-13). Where does one even begin to start with how badly this has been tortured?

One author explains that this passage, “Contrasts best- and worst-case scenarios. In the former case, *the believer* not only has eternal life, but full reward. In the latter, *no believer* can lose eternal life, even if he forfeits all eternal reward” [emphasis mine].⁷ Who does he say this is about? “*The believer*.” Another, talking about the great Judgment Seat of Christ says that this passage is about “*each man’s work*” and “*is valid for all Christians*.”⁸ Again, who is this for? He says,

⁷ John Niemelä, “If Anyone’s Work Is Burned: Scrutinizing Proof-Texts,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 8.1 (2002): 22–23.

⁸ Fred Chay, “The Bema Seat: It’s Background of Shame and Honor,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 14, no. 2 (2009): 63–64.

“to *all Christians*.” More particularly, Lewis Sperry Chafer said this is about the “*super-structure of Christian works*” being tested.⁹ These go on and on, especially in Free-Grace and Holiness circles.

The reality of the meaning of this passage is very different. “*If anyone builds on the foundation*” refers quite clearly to *ministers and pastors and shepherds* in churches. The foundation is Jesus Christ. Their gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw ... in context these are the methods and other messages that either rightly building upon or contradict the foolish message of the cross. Calvin explains rightly, “*By gold, then, and silver, and precious stones, he means doctrine worthy of Christ It follows on the other hand, that by wood, stubble and hay, is meant doctrine not answering to the foundation, such as is forged in men’s brain, and is thrust in upon us as though it were the oracles of God.*”¹⁰

The whole thing is *minister centered, not member centered*. And it is *corporate centered rather than individual centered*. The good works are not your private sins, but public things done to and in churches that end up destroying

⁹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Salvation* (Philadelphia, PA: Sunday School Times Company, 1922), 94.

¹⁰ John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), [136-37](#).

the pure message of the cross—either locally or at a denominational level. That’s why it was so important to understand Chs. 1-2 properly. This metaphor builds upon those earlier homilies.

“Each one’s work” is not every single Christian the moment after they make Jesus Lord or say the Sinner’s Prayer or whatever from then on out in their personal private ministry of their lives. It is specifically those who are building on the foundation in the church. Vs. 13 says that the Day—and by the way there is only one Judgment Day, not two. There is no judgment for unbelievers at the end of time and believers after the Rapture and before the Millennium. The Bible only knows one Day—*The Day*. This Day will disclose *the work* of *these* men (and women). How?

That day is like a consuming fire, the very purity and fire that is God himself. All those things men spend their public lives going after: fame, followers, numbers, adulation, big-budgets, baptisms, giant event centers, whatever OR honestly mistaken, dubious, dangerous, even nefarious theological ideas ... they will be tested. What goes through the fire purified and present are those things that match the methods and message of the cross. Those that do not, they

are burned away. This is the parallel corollary to the previous metaphor where **each will receive his wages according to his labor.**

This **isn't about a carnal Christian** who knows Jesus as Savior but not as Lord, who has no good works in his life, having only himself remaining on the other side. This is about men who spend their entire ministerial careers seeking other things having all those things burned up, so that **all that is left is them standing before the crucified Suffering Servant**—bare handed and naked, having wasted so much of their time and efforts. *If*, they also happened to have ministries that did things in line with the cross, those things will carry through and he will receive a reward for that work that he was assigned to. Paul and Apollos are Exhibit A for that. If not, he will be seen by all as a minister who has escaped only as through fire. All of this, of course, assumes the person is actually a Christian and not someone who said, “**Lord, Lord,**” but the Lord never knew him.

So does this mean that this section does not **affect the normal Christian**? I mean, why write this to the Corinthians if it isn't even about them? Not at all. Think about what this means for their boasting. If these works of theirs they are basically worshiping are bad, then God will humble them—

so why boast in them and create factions? If their work is all the same and good and it all makes it through the fire, then why make one better than the other in your minds? That's the absurdity of not thinking eschatologically about the very preachers that are teaching you.

Further, look at vs. 16. “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and *you* are that temple” (16). The horrible things done to Christ's church *that destroy the temple*, all in the name of pragmatism, innovation, Seeker-sensitive reorientation, entertainment driven, marketing, therapeutic moralism, word-of-faith, cheap grace, progressivism, conservatism, critical theory, nationalism and civic religion, traditionalism, gate-keeping, authoritarianism, ecumenicism, intellectualism, tribalism, confessionalism, doctrinal precision, plainness, you name it (and not all of those in and of themselves are bad things, but bad things done in the name even of Jesus Christ) ... *there is judgment coming*. Christ does not appreciate it when his bride is made to have spots and blemishes by well-meaning or ill-meaning people. That's the point. And since we are the church, this has direct bearing upon us. We are to be thinking rightly about just

this kind of thing so that we might be diligent when it comes to who and what we let in to our churches.

Next, notice that he says, “God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” In other words, *you are holy*! He’s already said as much at the beginning of the letter, but this strikes a blow to those trying to turn this in to spiritual vs. carnal Christians. No, there is only Christians and they are holy; the diametrical opposite of carnal.

God’s temple ties the planting and “human” comments from the previous two sections together. For Paul is using a word for “planting” (*phyteuō*) that is used of in the Garden of Eden (**Gen 2:8 LXX**). What’s so interesting about this to me is that the Garden was the first temple, a fact Beale and others have also noticed about the placement of these two metaphors side-by-side.

Furthermore, Eden was the place God put the first man—*anthropos*. So in saying that they are acting like mere humans, but that the foundation itself is turning them into a temple, it is a striking way of telling them that they are acting just like Adam in the Garden! Not how he was supposed to act—as God’s prophet, priest, and king, but how he actually acted: as a coward, profaner, and slave.

You are Christ's (3:18-23).

Adam did not make a right judgment. This takes us back to making judgments, a thing Paul brought up at the end of Ch. 2 and now returns to at the end of Ch. 3, and it will arise again and again throughout the letter, so best to understand it properly early. “Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you *thinks that he is wise* in this age...” Recall what he said at the end of Ch. 2, “The spiritual person *judges all things*, but is himself to be judged by no one” (2:15). For to “*think*” yourself wise is to make a judgment. But such a judgment is to do exactly what Adam and Eve did. They saw, they picked, they tasted, and they ate of the fruit of this age. Eve herself saw that the tree “*was to be desired to make one wise*” (Gen 3:6). That’s exactly why he said he could not address them as spiritual, but had to feed them the milk of the cross.

The only remedy to this kind of thinking is, as Paul says, to “*become a fool that he may become wise*” (1Cor 3:18). It’s a paradox. Sounds like Jesus, doesn’t it? “*Many who are first will be last, and the last first*” (Matt 19:30; etc.); “*Whoever would be great among you must be your servant*” (Mark 10:43-44; etc.); and so on. This again is ironic. And it

fits perfectly with what will happen to that same person, especially the teacher and shepherd, on Judgment Day—when they make it through the fire with just themselves.

Remember, Paul says, “The wisdom of this world is folly with God” (19a). He’s already said this many times. But now he adds two proof-texts. “He catches the wise in their craftiness.” This comes from the speech of Eliphaz the Temanite in Job 5:13. He is counseling Job and arguing that God frustrates the schemes of the crafty. He tries to say that Job is the crafty one. But this is a bad judgment from Eliphaz, who ironically is the one acting craftily in blaming Job for something he never did. In fact, it is at its root, Satanic. The word for crafty (*ormah*) is the same root as “crafty” (*arum*) in Gen 3:1 of the Nachash—the devil. Paul is in this way subtly linking the Corinthians factionalism to satanic-like behavior.¹¹

¹¹ There is also a word-play going on between *arum* (Gen 3:1)—“crafty” and *arumim* (Gen 2:25)—“naked.” Adam and Eve hid because they were *naked or exposed* before the Lord. Then the serpent comes in *crafty*, to tempt them. In 1Cor 3:15 we see similar exposure: the work burns and the builder is left with himself “as through fire.” That comes close to standing unsheltered before the Judge, like Adam and Eve. In the Greek, this wordplay is not present, but there is a direct link between *ormah* which is translated as *phronesis* in Job 5:13 LXX but becomes *panourgia* in Paul’s citation (*panourgia* is used in Job 5:12 LXX; Ciampa and Rosner write, “The Hebrew is closer to Paul’s rendition, using a word that implies a sly and crafty form of wisdom,” p. 704). But *panourgia* is the word Paul will later directly attribute to Satan in 2Cor 11:3, taking us right back to the Garden in Gen 3:1. Therefore, the conceptual overlaps in the 1 Cor 3, especially with its other “planting” and “wisdom” and “human” language can lead one to see

The second is from **Psalm 94:11**. “**The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.**” The psalm is a prayer for God to judge the wicked who oppress the righteous and who arrogantly claim that God does not see or care, reminding us of Cain killing Abel.¹² The Psalmist calls them **brutish fools** and says that God who planted the ear and eye and who disciplines the nations certainly knows the thoughts of man, which are vain and empty. Thus, God knows that the reasonings of worldly-wise people are vanity before him.

If God catches *the wise* in their craftiness and knows their thoughts are futile, then it makes sense to become *a fool*, doesn't it? But what does that mean practically? **Vs. 21**, “**So let no one boast in men.**” This is precisely what they've been doing. This then is the way they start to recognize the wisdom of the cross. They fight and boast over which teacher they are following, when they are all teaching the same thing.

the parallels, which if present, means that there is an even more striking jab at this satanic Corinthian behavior that is leaving them exposed like Adam and Eve.

¹² This citation also has indirect links to the Garden via the Psalm which speaks of “planting the ear” (**Ps 94:9**) and Yahweh knowing the thoughts of *adam* (man) (**11**), which becomes “wise” (*sophia*) in Paul's citation. Vanity (*mataioi*) is *hebel* in Hebrew, and this, besides its classic use in Ecclesiastes for “vanity” is the name Abel.

So he reminds them, “For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas [Peter] or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours” (21b-22a). The names here are a remarkable reversal of their boasting. The Corinthians were saying that they belong to Paul or Apollos or Cephas. The reality is, they belong to the Corinthians, for God gave Paul and Apollos to you for your benefit! The very leaders you are dividing over are gifts given to you.

But then he switches to more general things—and in fact many of these are found in the list at the end of Romans 8, in a letter that Paul will write just a few short years from now. The *world* is yours. The created order is not a rival power; it is placed under your inheritance in Christ. *Life and death* are yours. Whether you *live or die*, nothing can separate you from what is already yours. The *present and future* are yours. Nothing in this age or the age to come stands outside your possession in Christ. Nothing is left that could claim ownership over them or become a rival object of boasting.

He finishes with the greatest point of all. “And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (23). That’s what it means to truly be spiritual, which all Christians are. Recall that some

were even boasting that they followed Christ rather than these men. But **Christ himself was given by God to all of them**. In saying this, he is telling them that their union with Christ places everything else in subordinate, already-possessed relation to them, because Christ himself has risen and ascended and now sits at God's right hand. Hence, Christ is God's. God here is the Father, at whose right hand the Son sits. He is even now ruling over all things, and soon, all things will be put under his feet.

I began today with some bad theology. **"I surrender all."** I showed you how this passage has been used by many people to teach things that **simply aren't there**. Frankly, I think Paul would very much have seen this teaching as the very kinds of straw, hay, and stubble that are not going to make it through the fire. They are leading people astray by either causing some to never investigate whether their "profession" was genuine, or to introspect themselves into increasingly depressed isolation and oblivion as they see their sins and can't figure out why they can't stop.

Properly understood, 1 Corinthians 3 is given to the church so that we will stop measuring ourselves and one an-

other by the wisdom of this age and start measuring **everything by the cross**. It is given so that we will refuse to build the church with methods and messages that empty that cross of its power, and so that we will refuse to let anyone turn this chapter into a tool for either false security or crushing despair. It is given so that teachers will take heed how they build, so that congregations will take heed what they tolerate, and so that every believer will remember that they are already God's field and God's temple—holy, claimed, and under construction by the only foundation that can never be replaced. In short, it is given so that the church will stop boasting in men and start living as those who already possess all things in Christ. And when that happens, “I surrender all” will no longer mean a second crisis decision to make Jesus Lord, but the daily, grateful recognition that He already is.

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