

To Exalt Christ

To Equip, Encourage, Exhort and Edify God's Elect

The Church's Character – 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Temple – Test – Tenet – Therefore...

Paul has laid out a doctrinal and theological foundation. Jesus is that foundation upon which the church at Corinth or anywhere is to be built with material not subject to destruction.

The result of that firm foundation is that they are sanctified, declared holy. They experience grace and peace that comes in knowing Christ. They are enriched in speaking and knowledge, having spiritual gifts and perseverance. They are called and brought into fellowship with Christ. 1:1-9.

But what is used to build on that excellent foundation matters. Will it be as Calvin warned, *“a mass of strange doctrines”* or will it be with the finest of Biblical theology and doctrine such as the apostles used or the Reformers and the Puritans of the later centuries? Paul knew which building materials were suitable, right and proper because he was under the tutelage of the master architect of the church, Jesus Christ.

Paul's desire was that each Corinthian who attended that church be the best spiritual house that could be. Paul was not content though that they be a house. He wanted them to be a –

Temple – 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

The word ‘temple’ as Paul used it here meant – *“metaphorically the church, the body of Christ, a local church, of the present body of the individual believer.”* There is the heart of it. Paul had high expectations and goals for the Corinthians.

In **verse 16** he wrote – “*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?*” Paul has raised them above the level of a house, an ordinary dwelling, to that of being God's temple. IOW a sacred place, a sacred person, declared and made holy and blameless, justified and sanctified by faith alone in Christ alone to draw upon the Biblical and Reformed language/theology of the Reformers.

They are not a person or temple to **be** worshipped but a person **that** worships and reflects the foundation, Jesus Christ and those who built upon it with indestructible materials. They are to be that superstructure, that house, that temple that attracts others to the foundation they are built upon, namely Jesus Christ.

God's Holy Spirit lives in them says Paul. Remember Calvin's description of the Holy Spirit – “*diffused over all space; sustaining, invigorating, quickening all things in heaven and on earth, breathing into them being, life and motion – plainly divine.*” That is the Holy Spirit that lives in them. He is an occupying force, presence and power for their good and the glory of God. He lives there not temporarily but permanently.

The fact that the Holy Spirit lives in us as a spiritual being gives value to our physical being, the human body. God created us from the dust of the ground but it was holy dust because God used it. The resurrection of Christ also proves the value of the human body as does his promise to raise us up at the last day. John 6:39-40.

Our physical being is not an accident or the product of random chance. It reflects instead a well-thought-out design by the chief architect of the universe. Those who are critical of the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 point out that we share the same organs and systems as animals. That is true. When we read the Genesis account, we see a logical, progressive order to creation. For example, there were no living creatures until there was vegetation for them to eat. In the order of creaturely creations, we were the last physical being to be created.

It is therefore no wonder that we share organs and systems with the animals. They were created first and any good designer does not reinvent the wheel but instead uses the same technology that works. I recently read an article in Motor Sport magazine which said that racing teams normally win with last year's car, because last year's car and its technology was proven and tested for the current year.

So, yes, we share much with the animal kingdom but God did two unique things with us as human beings to set us apart from all the rest. **First**, he breathed the breath of life into us at creation and we became a living being, inheriting his image and thus many of his attributes. **Second**, he placed his co-creator, the Holy Spirit in us at our rebirth as Paul testified.

The Holy Spirit is our link to the Father. He helps us and intercedes for us as his saints at the throne of God as Paul told the Romans in 8:26. The Holy Spirit dwells in us individually & then as the church collectively. That church, whether in whole or in each part is so valuable, that he takes its destruction and preservation seriously. How seriously does God take the church?

In **verse 17** Paul wrote – *“If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”* That is how valuable we are as his saints.

Paul uses the word, *“sacred”* to describe the believer. The believer is therefore holy, set apart by God. Matthew Henry states – *“So all Christians are separated from common uses, and set apart for God and his service. They are sacred to him.”*

It is therefore no wonder that Paul uses such strong language when he understands the full import of one having the Holy Spirit living in you. It is tantamount, it is equivalent to having God himself reside in us. Calvin also wrote – *“For as that faith, which is devoted to the pure doctrine of Christ, sanctifies our souls for the right and pure worship of God.”* So we

are a person, a temple that worships. Paul having put this all forward to the Corinthians now in **verse 18** he gives them a –

Test – 1 Corinthians 3:18

Paul writes – *“Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a “fool” so that he may become wise.”*

Paul is saying that they all need a test in regard to wisdom, to what they really know. If their wisdom regarding Christ is world-based then they need to push reset, roll everything back to zero, and re-think, re-educate themselves.

In Romans 12:2, Paul, writing from experience told the church at Rome to be *“transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”* Paul spoke from his own experience of having his thinking renewed and his mind reset in relation to how he regarded Christ. He went from persecuting him to preaching him, from hating him to honoring him. He became a fool so as to become faithful.

Jesus’ own brothers went from thinking Jesus was deluded to knowing he was divine. Paul is saying to the church and its members at Corinth, roll everything you thought you knew back to zero and obtain the mind of Christ.

The Bible challenges us to go deeper, to really think about, study, consider and understand what we know and consequently what we believe. Our Christian faith is a thinking, rational faith that makes sense. There is nothing absurd about it, nothing that would cause us shame. The gospel in particular and God’s word as a whole, has that characteristic quality of being simple and straightforward and yet in the same breath, profound, deep, intense, worthy of our time and effort.

It was either Augustine or Charles Haddon Spurgeon or someone else who said – *“The Bible is shallow enough for a child not to drown, yet deep enough for an elephant to swim.”*

Calvin put it so well – *“It is necessary that our wisdom should in this way vanish, in order that the will of God may have authority over us, and that we be emptied of our own understanding, that we may be filled with the wisdom of God.”*

Why should one do a reset, become a fool to gain the wisdom that comes from on high? **Verses 19-20** help answer that question by presenting two tenets or two principles.

Tenet – 1 Corinthians 3:19-20

Tenet one. **Verse 19** – *“For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: “He catches the wise in their craftiness.”* We can land a probe on Mars, dive to the depths of the sea and do marvellous things in between. But by all that’s true, we are only here by the will of God, not by some cosmological explosion or bowl of primordial soup mix.

Paul quoted Job 5:13. The book of Job recorded 37 chapters of Job and his three friends thinking they were wise and knew all the answers as to why Job suffered. However, in chapters 38-41 God replies. Where does he start? He asked them – *“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation...who marked off its dimensions...who stretched a measuring line across it...on what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone?”* 38:4-6. That was just the beginning of what amounted to four chapters of God interrogating Job and his three friends and in doing so pouring out his wisdom regarding every molecule and atom that exists and in doing so, *“catches the wise in their craftiness.”* Job repented in dust and ashes.

Paul is saying that since you are God’s temple and the Holy Spirit lives in you, then you cannot help but reject the world’s wisdom. It will be foolishness, and therefore one must have the wisdom of God installed

in them. It is the natural alternative and unquestioned replacement to the wisdom of the world. The mind, the thinking is renewed and changed.

Tenet two. **Verse 20** – “*and again, “The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.”*” Paul quotes Psalm 94:11.

This is not to disparage the great accomplishments of science, medicine and engineering. God gave us minds to think with and physical abilities to turn thinking into things.

But ultimately our thoughts change and they can and are corrupted and must be corrected. Our inclination should always be to acknowledge where our intellectual ability came from. We are not wise in and of ourselves but only as God has equipped us and allowed us.

In Romans 1:20, 21 and 28 Paul wrote – “*For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen - being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse...For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile...Furthermore they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God....*” Paul hit every nail on the head.

He drove home the depravity, the foolishness of man that results from abandoning God, not retaining the knowledge, not knowing God. Calvin wrote in his commentary, dated 1546 in Geneva, “*The wisdom of the world is that which assumes to itself authority and does not allow itself to be regulated by the word of God or to yield itself up in entire subjection to him.*”

Paul rightly said through Job and the Psalmist - “*He catches the wise in their craftiness.” “The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.”*” That leads us to a -

Therefore... Verses 21-23

Paul begins with equivalent of a ‘therefore’ in **verses 21-23**, “*So then, no more boasting about men! 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, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.*”

What does he mean that “*All things are yours*” as he lists off things which are all-inclusive and then repeats, “*all are yours*”? Paul is pointing out that because they “*are of Christ, and Christ is of God*” they have been given by God through Christ everything for their benefit. Therefore, or “*So then*”, there should be no quarreling or division among them.

He started with himself and Apollos and Peter. They were not to boast in them or define themselves by them. Rally around what they taught, yes, but not around them. Value what they give, but not who they are. Paul referred to himself and to his co-preachers earlier as “*mere men*” and he was right.

The 16th c. Reformers, *Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli*; the Puritans, *John Owen, Thomas Watson, Thomas Boston, Stephen Charnock, Matthew Henry, William Perkins* were all mere men who wrote and preached.

They would be the first to deflect attention away from them and instead point people to the founder and foundation, the author and perfector of their/our faith – Jesus Christ. They wrote and taught good stuff, yes – why? Because like the Corinthians they “*are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in [them].*” How else could they write with such detail and precision and truth what, at its basic level, was the gospel, but in doing so brought out its profoundness, depth, richness and relevance.

The sermon is entitled, *The Church’s Character*. Character is defined as – “*the collective qualities that distinguish a person or thing.*” The character of the church at Corinth or anywhere is distinguished by the quality of its Christ, its foundation and those who have built on him. Amen. **Soli Deo Gloria**