

BUILDING A GREAT CHURCH

BY DR. JERRY VINES

By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
from Jerry Vines Ministries
2295 Towne Lake Parkway
Suite 116 #249
Woodstock, GA 30189

Let's Begin

Author Leslie Flynn, in his book, Great Church Fights, tells the story of two porcupines in the chilling north country of Canada huddled together to keep warm. Because they pricked each other with their quills, however, they decided to part ways. It wasn't long until they were once again side by side. Their very survival depended on it. They learned they had to bear one another's burdens!

Flynn's point in his little story is that the two porcupines are not too different from the church. Though each of us have "sticky" points about us, we are called to remain together for the Gospel's sake. We are called to be a church.

Paul dealt with some very sticky issues at Corinth. As we make our way through this exciting book, we will notice issues which one would think are characteristic only of a Christ-less culture but surely could never characterize the church of Jesus Christ! Paul's goal for the Corinthians is to move them from division to dedication, from sectarianism to solidarity. In short, Paul desires Corinth to be a great church. God desires no less for us.

As we begin our study of 1 Corinthians 3, let's follow the outline below:

- I. The Members of a Great Church (vv. 1-4)**
- II. The Ministry of a Great Church (vv. 5-17)**
- III. The Minister of a Great Church (vv. 18-23)**

I. The Members of a Great Church (vv. 1-4)

Let's begin our study of a great church with its members. Paul begins with precisely who makes up a great church in the first paragraph. He writes, "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?" (vv. 1-4).

Recall in our lesson last week, we touched upon these verses. Therefore, we will focus most of our time on verses 5-23.

First, note the kind of people which are the make-up of every congregation. There are three in number: the "natural" (2:14), the "spiritual" (2:15-3:1), and the "carnal"

(vv. 2-4). The Bible was not written in chapters and verses. These, of course, were latter additions which assist Bible readers to systematically study the Scriptures. With that in mind, Paul's thought pattern about the varying kinds of people actually begins, as we noted above, in chapter 2, verse 14. He speaks of the "natural" man.

The term Paul uses is "psuchikos" which literally means "natural" and pertains to the soul or mind. In other words, Paul is identifying the principal of animal life, which men have in common with brute beasts. How fitting for the Apostle to frame the "natural" man in this way! A person outside of Christ, void of the Spirit of God, is akin to animals, functioning like the beasts of the field.

Every church has the "natural" member on its rolls. Granted, no person who is outside of Jesus Christ is supposed to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ. However, the fact remains some

Reflection Connection

Think on the makeup of your own church. Do you think an element of carnality may be present? Why or why not? Be especially careful not to allow the discussion time to degenerate into judgmentalism or being overly critical. Always be sensitive to the Spirit's guidance and make discussion times edifying to the body of Christ and glorifying to the Lord of the church.



people who have never been saved are members. Perhaps it was through a misunderstanding of the Gospel, or a person joined the church because of an emotional experience. Whatever the case, no church is a great church because of members like these.

The second type is the “spiritual” (2:15-16; 3:1). Paul uses the root word “*pneuma*” which means “wind” or “spirit.” This root word is the same word translated as the Spirit of God. Before we can get a real sense of what Paul means by the “spiritual” here, observe the third term he uses in contrast to “spiritual,” “And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ” (3:1).

Clearly, Paul is contrasting “spiritual” with “carnal.” The term “carnal” comes from a word which means “flesh.” In fact, some translations literally translate this phrase as “men of flesh.” By “flesh” Paul is not referring to skin and bones. Instead, he is referring to the Corinthians’ “fleshly” behavior, a behavior rooted in their old nature and not in their new nature in Christ (cp. 2 Cor. 5:17).

*The term
“carnal” comes
from a word
which means
“flesh.”*

Furthermore, Paul equates the “fleshly” behavior with being “babes in Christ.” In other words, the behavior of the Corinthians was more like new born Christians and not spiritually developed believers. Their actions were infantile, immature, and indicative more of childishness instead of Christian adults. Needless to say, Paul was not paying them a compliment!

If the Corinthians were to be a great church in their pagan city, they must become “spiritual” and not “carnal.” They must grow up into stable maturity in Christ, living off the meat of the word, not the milk. No less is true for the church today. No church can be great if its members are mainly immature, carnal, and spiritual babes in Christ. Members of a great church are “spiritual” and not “carnal.” Division was at the root of their incipient carnality (v. 4).

II The Ministry of a Great Church (vv. 5-17)

Next, note the *ministry* of a great church. Paul continues, “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase” (vv. 5-7). A proper understanding of God’s ministries for the church is essential to building a great church.

Paul draws two illustrations from daily life to place the church’s work in its proper perspective. The first image comes from agriculture, a common image known to practically everyone. Paul’s intention is to move their thinking from the workers to the work, from the ministers to the ministry itself. Though Paul deals with the minister (see below), the Corinthians must grasp that ministry is bigger than any one minister. Who is Paul or Apollos? Ultimately, neither is anyone in the final scheme of things! God is the One Who gives increase.



Also, Paul gives them another image, an image from architecture, “For we are labourers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building” (v. 9). Thus, he moves from the field laborer to the construction worker. The church is like a building which takes all kinds of workers to complete: architects, carpenters, electricians, masons, plumbers, painters, etc. And, all must work in full harmony if the church is to be a great church.

In fact, Paul looks beyond the temporal to the *eternal*, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are” (vv. 16-17). As we examine these verses, we find three aspects of building for eternity that Paul reveals.

First, he reveals the *foundation* for eternity. Note his words, “According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (vv. 10-11). Paul offers a self-description as a “masterbuilder” or literally, a “skillful architect.” For Paul, he understood his role as one who drew up plans and laid foundations (cp. Rom. 15:20). No other work is more significant to the building of a great church than the proper foundation. Skyscrapers cannot be built on the foundation of a chicken-house.

No church can ever approach greatness apart from the sure foundation of Christ.

What are the particular elements for a proper church foundation? First, the church must be founded upon the *deity of Jesus Christ* (v. 11; cp. Matt. 16:18; 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:4-6). No other foundation will suffice (Matt. 7:24-26). No church can ever approach greatness apart from the sure foundation of Christ.

A great church must further be founded upon the *death* of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25). The church is redeemed by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus and redeemed by no other. And, what is true of the church is also true of one’s life. People cannot build their lives upon service, sacrifice, or success. One’s life is built only upon Christ if it is to have eternal significance, eternal life.

Second, Paul reveals the *construction* for eternity. Hear well the Apostle’s words, “Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble” (v. 12). Elsewhere Paul says, “And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:20-21). We must take care how we build as well as upon what foundation we build. In addition, we must be cautious concerning the materials we use for building.

Paul mentions two kinds of building materials for constructing a church for eternity. On the one hand, he speaks of “wood, hay, and stubble” and on the other he contrasts “gold, silver, and precious stones.” Obviously, the two kinds

Reflection Connection

Do you think it is common for Christians to think they will not face judgment by God? Explain.



of materials result in two very different structures. We may build either a mud hut or a mansion, a King's palace or a pauper's porch. One is permanent and the other shakes with even the slightest wind. One is spiritual, sacrificial, and steadfast while the other is careless, worthless, and, in the end, useless. Who would even consider using gold, silver, or precious stones on an inadequate foundation?

Finally, Paul reveals the *examination* for eternity. Whether or not we realize it, God will examine in eternity the structure we build in time. One day all building will be set ablaze by none other than God Himself!

Notice Paul's words, "Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire" (vv. 13-15). On "the day"—which is a reference to the Judgment Seat of Christ (cp. Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10)—while Christians will not be judged as sinners, they will be judged as servants. The work Christians perform will be tested through the fires of God's discernment—"the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is." No one is exempt.

Consequently, some will be rewarded while others "suffer loss." Note again this judgment is for believers not unbelievers. No believer in Jesus Christ will suffer as an unbeliever nor be banished from God's presence. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are eternally God's chosen people. Hence, no sermon a preacher proclaimed, no lesson a teacher taught, no opportunity a soul-winner ignored, nor tithe a person missed will go unnoticed at God's judgment bar. Jesus made it clear that even every single word which we speak will not go unnoticed (Matt. 12:36).

Jesus made it clear that even every single word which we speak will not go unnoticed.

III. The Minister of a Great Church (vv. 18-23)

One of the reasons the Corinthian church experienced so much division centered around their unhealthy understanding of the ministers God had placed in their midst. Earlier Paul confessed, "Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" (1:12-13). While it is natural for people to have preferences concerning the kind of minister to serve their congregation, the Corinthians obviously were unbalanced in their demands.

Paul makes it his purpose to correct the false views the church possessed. In fact, the only way the church could be a great church was to possess great ministers. Hence, Paul gives them the cure for their contentious ailment. What is first



required is a *proper estimation* of the ministry. But how is a proper estimation judged? What criteria could the church utilize to secure sound judgment?

Paul writes, "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain" (vv. 18-20).

The first criteria to properly evaluate the minister is *wisdom*. Unfortunately, too many pastors and servants of the church settle for a display of intellectual wisdom. In other words, "book smarts" is placed on a pedestal. Churches may get carried away with the intelligence of their pastor. Some churches demand their pastors possess academic doctoral degrees from the finest seminaries and even from Ivy League universities. While Paul was one of the most educated Christians of his day, he allowed no time to argue such non-sense. Indeed Paul's dictum was, in order to become wise, one must become a fool!

Understand: Paul was not anti-intellectual. Learning was good then as well as now. Yet no amount of formal studies could guarantee wisdom would result. One must renounce the "wisdom of this world" which results in "foolishness" and "craftiness" to receive true wisdom from God.

The second criteria is the *wealth* of the minister. Paul explains, "Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are your's; Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are your's; And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (vv. 21-23). Obviously, Paul is not referring to the pastor's financial portfolio. Rather he's speaking of the pastor's wealth in belonging to the entire church for the glory of Jesus Christ. No man should "glory in men" for God's servants belong to all—"all are your's."

Furthermore, God designated the entire "world" for the Christian's benefit. Whether in life or in death, all belongs to both God's church and God's servant. Our wealth is God Himself!

Reflection Connection

How much significance do you place on the pastor's education? Be specific. What is the most important method of securing wisdom a pastor may pursue? Explain.

Golden Greek Nugget

Paul questioned the Corinthians, challenging their divisive attitudes in choosing between him, Apollos, and Cephas, confessing themselves as but mere "servants" for the Lord (v. 5). The term translated "servants" is the Greek word "diakonos" and literally translates "servant" whether doing work as a slave, or as an attendant rendering free service. It is the same word used to translate the English term "deacon" (Phil. 1:1; 1Tim.3:8). The latter usage is indicative of a formal servant which called for specific qualifications to serve, whereas Paul is using the term in verse 5 more generally, as he does of Phoebe, the woman "servant" who carried his letter to Rome (Rom. 16:1).

Wrap Up

In this study, we have explored three requirements necessary to build a great church. A great church must be made up of great members. There must be more "spiritual" members than "carnal" members. "Carnal" members behave as if their old nature was never changed. On the other hand, "spiritual" members offer mature perspective and sacrificial service for the cause of Christ.

What is more, not only must the ministry itself must remain healthy, being firmly built upon the only sure foundation, Jesus Christ, but also the minister—God's pastor—must be a man after His heart, seeking His wisdom, His approval. Nor may the members possess an unbalanced view of God's man. Instead they must look at him as a man with feet of clay just as they are. The sole difference is, he is called by God and given to them for service in building a great church, an eternal church.

