

FIRST CORINTHIANS

The Ministry I Corinthians 3:10-17

Many times sincere Christians have said to me, "Dr. Arnold, I would give anything to be in the full-time ministry just like you. It would be such a thrilling, exciting life, giving all my time to the Lord's work!" Most people who say these things do not know the ministry is hard work, time consuming and emotionally draining. The Bible tells us with the office of minister comes a greater responsibility, and with this responsibility comes the greater discipline. "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jms. 3:1).

In the last sermon, we took a look at the minister as a servant and an insignificant instrument before a sovereign God who called him to be a minister. In this sermon, we are going to look at the ministry. Before, we saw what a minister is and now we are going to look at what he does and how he is accountable for what he does.

In I Corinthians 3:9 Paul said, "For we (Paul, Apollos, and all men called to the ministry) are God's fellow workers; you (the Corinthians, the local church collectively) are God's field God's building." The Corinthian Christians were referred to as a building, and from this metaphor Paul tells what the work of a minister is and how he is responsible before God to do his work well if he is to receive a reward. Paul often used a building, especially a temple, to explain the adding to and the building up of Christians (Eph. 2:20-22). When Paul mentioned a building, his mind immediately thought of a temple, for he said in I Corinthians 3:16, "Don't you (Corinthians) know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" The mention of a building caused Paul's mind to flash to the local church, and how it is being built by Christ through His ministers. We must remember the local church is people not buildings and programs. It is the people who God is interested in building. While physical buildings may be important in carrying out certain ministries of the local church, this is not what our Lord had in mind when he said, "... . . and on this rock (Christ) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). Our Lord was referring to people, and they are placed in this spiritual, holy temple called the Church, living stones, and this Church has been in the process of being built for two thousand years. Therefore the priority of the minister is the building of people who will last forever and not just things which will burn up on the day of judgment.

Paul envisioned ministers as men building this spiritual temple, the Church. First Corinthians 3:10-17 tells how they should build this building and what their attitudes should be in the process. Whatever else this section of scripture teaches us, we know a minister is a builder. He must build or he is not a good minister. Inherent within a man's call to the ministry is that drive to build the body of Christ both spiritually and numerically. A man who does not want to build is not worth his salt in the ministry.

Beginning with I Corinthians 1:10, Paul had blasted away at these Corinthians for exalting men which was causing divisions in the local church at Corinth. In 3:5-9, he showed that ministers are servants and deserve no glory. In 3:10-17, Paul will show that a minister and his ministry will come under the strict judgment of God. Therefore, the final test of a man's ministry is not man but God, and no minister should be exalted until the final judgment when all truth about his ministry will come to light.

BUILDING UPON THE FOUNDATION 3:10-11

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder. Paul, as a man called by God to minister, claimed to be a wise and skillful master builder. He was doing this by God's grace and enabling power not by his own flesh. He recognized all his labors for Christ were due not to his own skills but to God. "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I but the grace of God that was with me" (I Cor. 15:10). As an expert builder he laid the foundation for the Christian local church at Corinth. He came to Corinth and preached the gospel of Christ. People became believers in Christ and a church was founded and established where no man had ever preached before that time.

Not many today do what Paul did. The only Christians who have this privilege now are pioneer missionaries who go to unreached peoples. Today there are very few places in the modern world where the gospel has not been generally preached and some kind of Christian local church established. Most ministers do have to build on another man's foundation, but not Paul, for he preached in pure, virgin territory for Christ.

And someone else is building on it. Paul laid the foundation in Corinth. After he left that local church, other called ministers came to that congregation, such as Apollos, perhaps even Peter, and surely some elders. These men were not church planters but builders. What is your concept of a preacher? Is he a person who wears a black suit, a turned around collar, gives a little talk once or twice a week, has long solemn face and goes around making holy, pious groans? That is a wrong conception of any minister. Scripturally he is a builder. A more accurate concept of a preacher might be a man wearing a hard hat and a carpenter's apron with a saw and hammer in hand. He is building a spiritual building, the temple of God, the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But each one should be careful how he builds. Even though a minister is only a servant, he has a grave responsibility to build upon the foundation a strong superstructure. There is a right way and a wrong way to build the church of Christ. In this context "each one" is referring to ministers, men called and gifted by God to build the church in a special way. However, saints who do the work of the ministry are also ministers in the broadest sense, so this does apply to all Christians.

And He (Christ) gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastor-teachers for the purpose of equipping the saints that the saints might do the work of the ministry and that the saints might build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:1-12, J. Arnold translation).

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If the foundation of a building is solid, then the building will stand and not crumble, but a bad foundation always means a bad building. Paul made it very clear that the foundation of the spiritual temple, the Church, is Jesus Christ. His person, His deity, His life, His death, His salvation, His doctrines, His resurrection, His ascension, His Holy Spirit who lives in all Christians, and His return and all that surrounds it make up the foundation. All this truth about Christ is revealed to us in the Bible. Jesus Christ is the foundation for every Christian, for every local church and for the universal Church. Any church which begins to move away from the person and work of Christ begins to slide spiritually and soon will collapse and totally crumble.

The Christ spoken of here is not the Christ of one's imagination or whims but the Christ of scripture. This is why it is so important to know the Bible so we can have a solid foundation for our Christian lives and our local church.

Apparently the Greek philosophers were trying to invade the church at Corinth, and they wanted to lay a different foundation of philosophy, speculation and theories. There were also the Hebrew Judaizers who wanted to lay down the different foundation of good works, saying if a person wanted to be saved, he had to keep the works of the Mosaic law. Yet, Paul dogmatically declared there is only one foundation, Jesus Christ, and every builder is to build upon that foundation so as to produce a strong local church. This is why every minister must keep Jesus Christ at the center of his ministry.

BUILDING WITH THE RIGHT MATERIALS 3:12

If any man. Again in this context, this refers to ministers who are called a separated unto the gospel ministry by God, but it could apply to any Christian who ministers in the home, the church or the community.

Builds on the foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw. A minister's first responsibility is to build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ His second responsibility is to build the temple, the Church of Christ, with the right materials so the Church will grow strong and be effective for Christ. Paul lists two kinds of materials, those which are valuable and permanent and those which are worthless and temporary. The "gold, silver and costly stones" are things which can withstand the heat of a blazing fire. "Costly stones" probably do not refer to jewels like rubies, diamonds and emeralds but to large foundation stones carved out of granite or marble which were put in a foundation to raise the walls and complete the building. It was a common sight for the Corinthians to see these costly stones in the many pagan temples they had in their own city. The "wood, hay or straw" were also a common sight, for this was the ordinary stuff out of which many of the poorer Corinthians built their homes. All three of these were highly combustible, and a building made of these materials is not very enduring.

These materials were symbols and seem to refer to what the minister says and does, what he teaches and how he equips the saints to do the work of the ministry, and what he ministers and how he lives his ministry out in a practical way. So these materials refer to the doctrine the minister teaches and how well he equips the saints to do the work of the ministry, in building the spiritual temple, the Church. The "gold, silver and costly stones" refer to pure doctrine and also to developing a Christian mind set where one learns to live by God's wisdom, the hidden things of God so as to have the mind of Christ. The "wood, hay and straw" refer to the wisdom of the world which is the speculations, the traditions and the changing philosophies of men. It is false doctrine, impure doctrine and watered down doctrine which produces no strong Christians and equips no one to do the work of the ministry.

People are eternal. Everything else will go up in smoke. The things which will be burned are the Christian fads and the non-people priorities which the minister spent so much time supporting in his so-called ministry.

"We need to ask this question, 'Is what I am doing building people or just building my own little empire? Isn't it possible to be so concerned about things, ideas, and projects, that we fail to see whether or not all of that enhances the building up of people'" (Knofel Staton, First Corinthians)?

Many pastors on judgment day will come to realize they wasted their lives on frivolous, non-eternal projects. They will discover they invested time, interests, priorities, monies and talents in things which were worthless as far as God's eternal evaluation is concerned.

BUILDING WITH THE RIGHT MOTIVES 3:13

His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire. Sometimes to the human eye it is difficult to distinguish between "gold, silver and costly stones" (sound doctrine, well-equipped saints, godly wisdom) and "wood, hay and straw" (false doctrine, mushy saints and human wisdom). This is why there is coming a day of judgment upon every minister's works. God has determined in His plan for that moment to come at the Judgment Seat of Christ for the doctrine, lifestyle and training of men to be tested by God. There is a day coming when the minister's life will be turned inside out and God will judge not only his works but the motives behind his works. The minister's works will be revealed by fire which purges the cross and leaves the pure metal. The fire may be symbolic of God's holiness when His judgment determines what is destructible and what is indestructible, what shall last for eternity and what shall be consumed before our eyes, what was done to glorify God and what was done to glorify self.

What is said of ministers and God's judgment on their works is also true of all believers and their works.

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (II Cor. 5:10).

There is a broad sense in which all Christians are ministers. At the Judgment Seat of Christ each person's works will be seen in their true character and the piercing, searching eye of Christ will see right through all our phony, false, self-centered motives. It is a tremendous motivation for both the minister and the ministering saint to live a godly, holy, consecrated life because he or she knows examination day is surely coming. So much of what appears to the Christian work is really the energy of the flesh, and on judgment day, God will get down to the truth of why we did what we did. So many churches and Christian ministries today are built on the flesh (sin nature) and not from the Bible. Pastors and Christian workers are driven by success, bigness, influence, power and money. Pastors must be builders, but they also must build biblically.

And the fire will test the quality of each man's work. Christian ministers will not be judged so much on the quantity of works (numbers, success, large congregations and buildings) but on the quality of work and the motives behind it. It is not how much the minister has done but how faithful he has been. It is possible for a person who has seemingly done little work to have a big reward because his motives were right. But it is also possible for a person to have outwardly done much work but whose motives were terrible to have little reward. The ideal is much work with right motives; this glorifies God the most. If we are doing things for Christ with positive motives, then we will never be ashamed at Christ's coming. “And now, dear children, continue in faith, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming” (I Jn. 2:28).

BUILDING WITH THREE TYPES OF MINISTERS 3:14-17

The Wise Builder: If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. The first minister is a wise builder, a wise worker, who built sound doctrine, a strong God-centered world and life view, and equipped solid saints on the foundation which is Christ. This is "gold, silver and costly stones" and for these materials he will be paid or rewarded for his labors. These works will survive the fiery judgment of Christ.

Christian, are you involved in ministry? Any Sunday school teaching, counseling, home Bible teaching, home schooling, teaching in a Christian school, or any work you do for Christ will be judged by Christ at the Judgment Seat. He will judge your motives and reward you accordingly.

Mr. Gilbert, a Plymouth Brethren, tells about a dream he had of the Judgment Seat of Christ. His works were piled up, and angels kept bringing them in and piling them up, up, up. He was so proud of his works. Then another angel came in and lit a fire to it. It was like a burning hay-stack -- it came down, down, down. Finally another angel came in with broom and dustpan and swept in a few precious stones.

The Unwise Builder: If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. This pictures the unwise minister who builds upon the foundation with poor material (wood, hay, straw). This is the saved minister who teaches twisted or weak doctrine, who gives a perverted Christian world and life view, who goes after every new Christian fad and who fails to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry. These works will not stand the test of judgment. The minister will suffer loss, not of salvation but of reward. Notice carefully it is the minister's works that are burned up not the man. This is not a Protestant purgatory. This unwise minister will receive little reward, if any, for lousy workmanship in building the temple (the Church) upon the foundation of Christ. This man will be saved; yet he shall escape through fire as one fleeing from a burning building. He will escape only with his life and all else will be lost. What a stern thought for all who are in the ministry. All works will be examined and evaluated on that judgment day and the unfaithful minister will lose reward and yet be saved by the skin of his teeth. There are going to be many embarrassed preachers on judgment day, but the faithful will be heaped up with rewards and will be basking in the glory of Christ. This is strong motivation for being a faithful minister and a faithful saint.

The False Builder. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. Paul made the point that these Corinthian believers, collectively, as a local church, were a temple of God, part of the great temple of God, the universal church. They were a visible, spiritual temple within the invisible universal temple. The Bible speaks of three spiritual temples 1) the body of the individual Christian (I Cor. 6:19-20); 2) the universal Church (Eph. 2:20-22) and 3) the local church collectively (I Cor. 3:16). A temple is where the presence of God resides. These three temples are to be constantly built up spiritually by faithful ministers of God. Lest we miss the point, this verse is stating the local church houses the presence of God, not as a physical building but in the people collectively.

"We have done something terrible when we have talked about the church building as being the "house" of God or the "temple" of God. That would mean then that the building is more sacred than the people. But it is the people who are the "house" of God and are the "temple" of God. For it is not just what goes on inside a building, but what goes on inside a people, that is important" (Staton, I Corinthians).

The building, the temple, the church, the people are important to God. Yet, there are some so-called ministers who seek to destroy God's temple, the church. Apparently there were some who were trying to do this at Corinth. Those ministers who wanted to follow Greek philosophy were trying to destroy that local church. There were also some Judaizers in that assembly who were intent on destroying that body of believers through the false doctrine of salvation by good works. Paul taught that belief in Jesus Christ alone is sufficient for salvation and any other formula is another gospel, and salvation by works is building rotten material on the solid foundation of Christ. The modern day counterpart to these false builders would be the liberal ministers in our churches who deny the deity of Christ, reject an inspired Bible, see Christ's death as that of a martyr or merely an example of love, accept no literal hell and a hundred other heretical

teachings. Another modern counterpart would be the so-called evangelicals who have watered down the gospel to make it acceptable to people so as to gain numbers, success, power and money; the result is no real gospel.

One cannot set out to destroy the church of God without serious repercussions. To destroy God's holy temple, the Church, is to invite God's eternal destruction. At the judgment day, the false teachers will fall under the eternal judgment of almighty God and face His wrath for all eternity. God's judgment will show the false builder what he really is, a Christ-rejecting, God-hating apostate and heretic who is lost forever and will be damned forever. An unwise builder may have a little reward because he is a true Christian, but a false builder will not have any reward because he is not saved. He will face only the judgment of a holy, wrathful God. Now, Christian, can you see how serious one should take the ministry? To be a minister of God is a high and holy calling and an awesome responsibility. If you really desire to be in the fulltime ministry, then sit down and count the cost, for with this high calling comes great responsibility and accountability.

CONCLUSION

If you are without Christ as your Savior and Lord, the Bible teaches you will be judged at the Great White Throne Judgment, the final judgment for all rejecters of Jesus Christ. You will be removed from the Book of Life and you will be cast into a Christless eternity. Why? Because you have followed the wisdom of the world which says there is no God or that if there is one man is saved by his good works. You will also be eternally judged because you have rejected Jesus Christ who alone has the power to forgive sins and grant eternal life.

Non-Christian, unbeliever, rejecter, will it be the Great White Throne or the Judgment Seat of Christ for you? The answer to that question is found in what decision you will make for Christ in this life. The Apostle Paul, many years ago, summed up the whole issue when he said, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).