

1 Corinthians 3:15

by Jim Seghers

In chapter three of his First Letter to the Corinthians St. Paul admonishes the Corinthians because members of that church have separated into factions. As a result he states that he could not address them as “spiritual people, but as fleshly people, as infants in Christ” (1 Cor 3:1). Because of their “jealousy and rivalry” some have claimed, “I belong to Paul,” and others have stated, “I belong to Apollos” (1 Cor 3:4). This leads Paul to give an instruction on the role of God’s ministers beginning with verse 5.

In relationship to Apollos he declares, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). This is an affirmation of the primacy of grace to which both Paul and Apollos are dependent. Because they are God’s servants they are equal even if their roles are different. However, they will be rewarded according to the quality of their works. “Wages,” which is translated as “reward” in KJV, indicates *merit*, and “labor” equates to *works*. Indeed the flavor of the Greek reflects intense labor that is accompanied amid difficulties. This is an apt description of the effort needed to be a faithful minister and living a faithful Christian life.

Beginning in verse 10 Paul focuses on the respective roles of ministry beginning with his apostolate, which had as its purpose to lay the foundation of faith in the Corinthian church. “I laid a foundation and another is building upon it” (1 Cor 3:10). This is consistent with the dynastic nature of the Church. Paul and the other apostles were chosen to be ministers in Christ’s kingdom. Their offices will be passed on to their successors, that is, those who build on the foundation laid by the apostles. Thus, after Jesus ascended into heaven Peter declared that it was necessary to elect a successor to Judas (Acts 1:15-22) citing Psalm 109:8: “May another take his *office*” (Acts 1:20). The KJV captures the same idea in its translation: “and his bishoprick let another take.”

In writing to Timothy St. Paul affirms the dynastic succession in Christ’s kingdom, the Church. “So you, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And what you [2nd generation] heard from me [1st generation] through many witnesses entrust to faithful people [3rd generation] who will have the ability to teach others [4th generation] as well” (2 Tim 2:1-2).

“Like a wise master builder” (1 Cor 3:10) Saint Paul lays the solid foundation, which is Christ. Those who come after him to build on that foundation will be judged according to the quality of their workmanship: “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw” (1 Cor 3:12). The quality of their effort will be judged on “the Day,” which is a clear reference to the great day of God, when he comes in judgment (Obad 15; Amos 5:18-20; Joel 1:15; Zeph 1:14-18; Joel 2:30-32; Isa 24:21; Jer 9:25-26; Amos 4:2; Mt 7:22; 12:41-42; Lk 10:14; 21:34-35; Lk 10:14).

In the “fire” of God’s judgment each person’s actions in building the Church, which is described as the temple of God of which we are a part (1 Cor 3:16), are evaluated (1 Cor 3:13). Two important ideas are expressed here. The first draws its meaning from temple imagery and the

second concerns God's judgment of our actions, which is Paul's main point. I will briefly comment on both concepts.

Temple imagery begins in the creation accounts, which describe God building two temples: the macro temple of the world and the miniature temple of man's body. In both cases it is God's abiding presence and creative action that constitutes their sacredness. The holiness of God's presence in his temple is also seen in connection with the construction of the tabernacle and later the Jerusalem temple. For example, the last chapter of Exodus narrates the spectacular confirmation of God's presence that accompanied the dedication of the tabernacle. "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex 40:34-35). A similar demonstration of God's presence occurred at the time Solomon's temple was dedicated. "And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord" (1 Kgs 8:10-11; 2 Chron 5:11-14; 7:1-3).

This temple imagery is a type or foreshadowing of the true Temple, which is Jesus Christ. "The Jews then said to him, 'What sign have you to show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken" (Jn 2:18-22). Jesus is the "true Tabernacle" of Heb 8:2. He is the divine Pattern, of which the Tabernacle, Temple on earth, and our bodies were a "copy and shadow" (Heb 8:5; 9:11-12; 23-24; 10:1; Ex 25:9, 40; 26:30; Num 8:4; Acts 7:44). When we are incorporated into Jesus we become a part of that Temple of which he is the head (Jn 15:1-5; Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 6:15; 12:12-27; Eph 2:16; Col 3:15). That body is the Church.

Purification imagery is expanded in verse 15. Earlier Paul introduced the idea of reward: "wages" in verse 7 and "wage" in verse 14. Paul is clearly referring to Christians that will not be condemned, but who will receive a heavenly reward. However, "if someone's work [*ergon* in Greek] is burned up," that is, found to be defective, he "will suffer loss" (1 Cor 3:15). The Greek word that is translated as "suffer loss," *zemiotesetai*, comes from the word *zemiōo*. In the Septuagint this Greek word is always used in the sense of punishment. The Septuagint's use of Greek words is an important tool in understanding the use of Greek words in the New Testament because about 85% of the time the New Testament cites the Old Testament it quotes the Septuagint not the Hebrew Old Testament. Thus when a person's works are defective he will suffer punishment, a period of purification: "that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only [*houtos*] as through fire" (1 Cor 3:15).

To explain this state of temporary punishment after death, which some will undergo, the early Church in the West used the Latin word *purgatorium* from which we derive the English word, a purgatory. *Purgatorium*, the state, and *purgativus*, the action, refer to the same reality, namely,

purification. Latin, of course, was the language spoken in the west. Two additional observations need to be made regarding this text.

Paul's use of *houtos*, "*but only as through fire*" (1 Cor 3:15) finds an echo in Peter's first letter in which he also addresses the issue of purification: "so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable *even though [houtos]* is tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:7).

Lastly, "works," [*ergon* in Greek], are significant because of their relationship to salvation. Clearly, when they come from human nature or in connection with the laws of the Old Testament they are powerless to contribute to our salvation. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -- not because of works [*ergon* in Greek], lest any man should boast" (Eph 2:8-9; see also Rom 2:20, 27-28). However, Paul does not reject the necessity of "works" as is clear in the next verse. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for [the Greek word *gar* introduces a purpose clause: "for the purpose of"] good works [*ergon* in Greek], which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10; see also Tit 3:5-8, 14; 1 Pet 1:1-20; Jas 2:24; Phil 2:12-13; 1 Cor 15:10).

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