

# Commentary

- 1-4 It's clear that Paul is speaking here to Christians ('brothers'), the spiritual people who can discern spiritual truths (2:14). But these Corinthian Christians are 'still of the flesh' (3) rather than living (in Romans 8 terms) 'according to the Spirit'. That's what makes them 'babies' (1), 'wretchedly, unacceptably, spiritually immature' (Carson). The two bits of evidence that they still-live-as-if-not-really-Christian are
- *their diet*: 'milk not solid food'. Paul isn't saying that the cross is basic teaching we should grow out of: we never grow out of the cross. We rather grow more deeply into it and into the fullness of its implications. The Corinthians had failed to do so.
  - *their behaviour*: quarrelling (cf 1:11) motivated by jealousy, both of which are among 'the works of the flesh' (Gal 5:19-20).
- Dividing behind personalities is similarly 'of the flesh': their faulty view of Christian leadership shows their defective understanding of church.

## 5-9b **You are God's field**

We mustn't read more into this agricultural metaphor than is intended: Paul quite simply wants to demote, even debunk, the leaders whom the Corinthians are improperly elevating. The way he does this is by highlighting that it is God's activity that really matters.

'What is Apollos/Paul?' ... 'what' rather than who' expresses greater disdain. For they are only 'servants' (5b), not 'anything' (7a). They are 'fellow-workers', but this is not to make the point 'we have the privilege of working with God', but to reduce all Christians leaders to the same lowly level. Admittedly Paul 'planted' the seed (6a), in the sense that he reached Corinth first and evangelised the city. Apollos followed Paul and 'watered' it (as described in Acts 18:24f). They did have pioneer tasks in relation to the seed, significant certainly, but unskilled, mechanical (7a).

Here is Paul's point is: who gave them these tasks (5b)? who gives the growth (6b, 7c)? who pays the wages of the workers (8)? Those who plant and water have to wait for the seed to sprout (in this, they are 'one', or 'have one purpose' [8a], looking for a good harvest): no human being can do that mysterious and indispensable third stage.

## 9c-15 **You are God's building**

Just as in the field, the labourers have important roles, so in building, 'one laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it' (10). But Paul's point here is not 'but God gives the growth'. The issue here is the quality of the builders' building work.

*The foundation* (11)

The true foundation is Jesus himself. Paul is 'expert' (translating the word 'wise' as used in 1:18-2:16), laying that true foundation by

preaching no other Jesus (cf 2 Cor 11:4) than the crucified one (2:2): have the teachers that followed him been so careful (10b)?

*The superstructure* (12-14)

Paul contrasts two building materials: gold/silver/precious stones and wood/hay/straw (ie true Christian teaching, and false teaching/wisdom of the world). On Judgement Day, the quality of these two ministries will be 'manifest' in just two verdicts: durable material will survive, combustible material will burn (ie the teaching seen to be valueless). 15 says that someone conducting such ministry will lose their reward, but not their salvation, escaping fire 'by the skin of their teeth'.

All who conduct Christian teaching ministry should take these words to heart. Such ministry builds a church. But whether that building is to the blessing or the harming of the church depends on the quality of what is taught: is it true/Biblical? Judgement day will finally reveal it.

## 16-17 **You are God's temple**

'The temple' specifies the building metaphor. In the OT, it was the dwelling place of God (cf Exod 25:8; Ezek 48:35). In the NT, God's dwelling place is his people (whether the individual [1 Cor 6:19], or the local church [as here], or the universal church [Eph2:22]). By his Spirit, he is with us when we gather (Matt 18:20) and when we go (Matt 28:20) in his name.

The church must not be dishonoured ... whether divided by jealousies, deceived by false teaching or defiled by immorality. These things destroy the church for they destroy its unique identity as the holy people of God indwelt by the Spirit of God. To act against the church is to act against God, and shows that you are not a believer but headed for 'destruction' in hell.

Note how these three paragraphs about the church are Trinitarian: it owes its existence and growth to God the Father, it is built on the foundation of God the Son, and it is indwelt by God the Holy Spirit. No other community on earth can compare with this lofty status: the unimpressive-seeming church of 1:26-31 is actually the church of God (1:2).

18-23 returns to the theme of wisdom and folly. As we saw in 1:26-31, it was part of God's wisdom (and his rejection of worldly wisdom [cf Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11]) to make church as it is; if the Corinthian Christians so misunderstand God's church and belittle it by exalting human leaders, they are showing their folly, not their wisdom.

So Paul's conclusion is a call for repentance ('no more boasting about men') and better thinking: if anybody belongs to anybody, their leaders belong to them (not 'I belong to a particular leader'). Why? Well, consider the immense privilege given to every Christian (rather than any exalted position given to certain who are 'in leadership'): everything promised to Jesus belongs to us (cf Rom 8:17).

## Launching question

What do you think God thinks of the Christian church in the West today?  
Why do you think those things?

## The story so far ...

*This passage will help us understand better how God sees the church.*

READ 3:1-23

*Paul has been explaining that we can only know God by the ministry of the Holy Spirit revealing him to us.*

In what ways do these Corinthians look as if they don't have the Holy Spirit?  
What is wrong with their diet?  
What is wrong with their behaviour?

*So Paul now shows them where their understanding of 'church' is defective.*

### • You are God's field (5-9a)

Explain the metaphor in your own words.

What is the role of Paul and Apollos?

How does Paul demote these leaders that the Corinthians were elevating?

In what ways have the Corinthians misunderstood the church?

### • You are God's building (9b-15)

Explain the metaphor in your own words.

How does Paul compare his ministry with the teachers who follow him?

What are these different building materials that Christian teachers can use?

What is the application of this to Christian leaders today?

### • You are God's temple (16-17)

Explain the metaphor in your own words.

Why is it so serious to harm the church? (*several answers*)

In this context, what does it mean to destroy the church?

Re-read 3:18-23

How are the Corinthian Christians showing they're not wise (cf 1:26-31)?

If everything promised to Christ is our inheritance too (cf Romans 8:17),  
how will this affect my attitude to my leaders, and to leadership?

## Thinking it through

Summarise what Paul teaches about the church in these three paragraphs.  
How does Paul apply each paragraph to Christian leadership?

In what ways might each paragraph challenge our views today?

What are the encouragements here?

What are the warnings here for the Christian church in the West today?

## Summary

Corinth was New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas all rolled into one. It was the Roman Empire's second city, and a centre for commerce, popular culture, mishmash-religion and pleasure. Paul's trip there in Acts 18:1-17 grew a church in the midst of hostility and inter-community tension. Within 2-3 years, Paul writes this letter responding to news brought by Chloe (1:11) and to issues raised in a letter they'd written to him (7:1).

In ch 1-4, as Paul confronts divisions in the church, look out for themes of ...

- worldly ways of thinking (eg exalting individual leaders, or their polished public speaking, stressing form over content);
  - over-realised eschatology (ie bringing into the present some of the blessings God promises us for heaven), producing a triumphalism where individuals have an inflated view of their own maturity;
  - what is authentic Christian ministry (and defending Paul's own ministry).
- Ch 1-4 is really a pastoral sermon on the theme of **true wisdom and false**.

## The story so far ...

1:10-4:21 is addressing the single issue of divisiveness or factionalism in the Corinthian church. Ch 3 is at the heart of this topic bringing together the 'I follow x, y or z' (1:12; 3:4) and the theme of wisdom and foolishness (1:19f; 3:18f). In this context, ch 13's call to love is very pertinent.

Paul tackles personality cultism by going to 2 deeper issues that lie behind it:

- (a) the Corinthian Christians have been seduced by pomp, prestige, rhetoric, social approval, publicly-lauded 'wisdom'; Paul reminds them that the gospel, the church and the true gospel preacher all seem unimpressive.
- (b) in misunderstanding Christian leadership, the Corinthians show that they have misunderstood the church. This is Paul's theme in ch 3-4.

## Theme Sentence

An immature, worldly understanding of church lies behind the Corinthian Christians' wrong view of their leaders.

## Ideas for application

- All Christian leaders need humility to admit 'we're not anything'!
- Since all our Christian ministry will be assessed, we need to be sure we're building on the right foundation.
- How dreadful to do anything that 'destroys' God's holy temple.
- To be a mature Christian, we need to look at our diet and behaviour.