

A Ministry Shaped By Sovereign Grace

1 Corinthians 3

Introduction

Most of you are familiar with the story of *The Three Little Pigs*. The mother pig's children leave home and are no longer little pigs. They set off to make their fortune and each build themselves a home. The first pig builds a home out of straw because he's **cheap**. It shakes in the wind. The second pig builds a home out of sticks because he's **lazy**. And the third pig builds his home out of bricks. He does the work to build a structure that is strong; he lays the foundation, brick by brick, and he builds it up. The big bad wolf then comes to blow their houses down, and only one house stands – the house of bricks. The moral of the story is simple: **be careful how you build; take care how you build! (Or if you come from a Chinese family, the moral of the story is to study hard, and work hard to get a job or you're going to end up like the first 2 little pigs!)**

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3, tells us that there is a wrong way and a right way to build the church. In fact, the future of your church, and the ministry of the gospel, depends on how you build today (as pastors, lay leaders, deacons, and elders). Where you end up as a church depends on the materials you use, whether you're building with straw, sticks, or bricks. There is a wrong way and a right way to build the people of God; there is a wrong way and a right way to do church.

I will unpack the Scriptures this evening from 1 Corinthians. Paul tells us how we should be building the ministry of the gospel and Jesus in our church. He tells you the things to watch for, the things to be careful with and look after, and the important things to keep in mind, as you give yourselves to the work of building His church.

The Corinthian Background

Let me tell you a bit about the city of Corinth, where you find this church:

- The Greek city was a prominent city in the world of the New Testament, in the province of Greece.
- **It was probably the wealthiest city in Greece.** It was the place where people went to get rich, make a name for themselves, become powerful, and gain influence in society (they had an infatuation with the flashy, impressive, and with looking good).
- **It was the key city for business and commerce;** a major business hub. It was placed on a narrow isthmus, linking the South and the North, and it was the connecting point for trade and commerce. The city was flanked by sea ports on both sides of the city. It was the connecting point for sea trade and commerce.
- **It was a sports crazy city.** It was the host to the Isthmian Games every two years, which is second only to the Olympics.
- **It was an entertainment city.** Their theater seated 18,000 people and their concert hall seated 3000.
- Because of its place of prominence, trade and commerce, and arts and travel, **it was also a cosmopolitan city.** Lots of cultures, languages, and people groups lived in this city (E.g. Jews, ex-soldiers, philosophers, merchants, sailors, freed-men, slaves, trades-people and etc.) **It was a multi-ethnic city.**
- **It was also a very religious city.** A massive hill overlooked this city. The great temple of Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, resided on the summit of this hill. It was a city that housed the many temple prostitutes who serviced the worship of this goddess (There were a thousand of them who came down each evening to sell themselves on the streets. It was a cult dedicated to the glorification of sex). Everywhere you looked, you were reminded that this was a religious city; **it was a city where sexual immorality was rampant** (so much so

that, in the Greek speaking world, the term ‘Corinthian woman’ was used to speak of a ‘a loose woman’: a tramp)

This was the city of Corinth; a rich, powerful, cosmopolitan, multi-cultural, commercial, urban, sports crazy, sex crazed, and entertainment city. (Does this sound familiar? It sounds like Manila, Sydney, Hong Kong, New York)

In this city, Paul planted a church (Acts 18). He works to support himself, while preaching the gospel, and plants a church, and pastors it for one and a half years. However, not long after he leaves, things start to fall apart in this church; things start to slide. **They looked impressive, but things are not right within! Why? Because they started moving away from the foundation, and started focusing and building with the wrong things.**

Reminder – Building The Church Starts With Your Personal Maturity

- 1 Corinthians 3: 1-4

And here is the worst part – the church in this city thought they were mature or spiritual. **They measured spiritual maturity by the externals rather than Christ centered godliness and love as believers.**

Don’t get me wrong. They were an impressive church these Corinthians. They had lots of ministry happening in their church, they had the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in the abundance of gifts in their church (1 Cor.1:4-7). They were an impressive church, and after a while when you look impressive it’s easy to gauge your maturity by the externals of your ministry e.g. the size of your building or your facilities, the ministries you run, the size of your budget, how well known your church is, how long your church has been around, the number of people you have, the no of degrees your pastor has.

And so 3 years have passed, yet, Paul says to them - *But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh – people who are worldly, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for you are still of the flesh – you are still worldly.*

Now 3 times Paul will call them men and women **‘of the flesh’** or **‘worldly’**. They’re living and acting like babies, still in their diapers or children who have never grown up. In all of life the expectation is always growth or progress. No one goes to college to stay in first year forever. No one works in a job with the ambition to never skill up. No one plants a fruit tree and not expect it to grow and bear fruit. So when there’s no growth it’s an indicator that something’s wrong. The expectation is the same in the Christian life. The expectation is a growth towards maturity. But here in this church in the city of Corinth there has been no growth or progress.

And why does Paul call them worldly or fleshly? Look at how their immaturity is expressed?

*v.3. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, **are you not of the flesh/are you not worldly and behaving only in a human way?** ⁴For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?*

Their immaturity was expressed in jealousy and strife in division. Does this sound familiar? Yesterday we saw that the marks of a life worthy of our calling in Jesus was unity, maturity, purity

around Jesus (Eph.4:1-16). Here instead we have a life unworthy of our calling in Jesus. And it's a life marked by disunity, immaturity, and impurity around everything else but Jesus.

So read v.3-4 again. What's happening here? An immaturity marked by jealousy and strife in division. They were a divided community gathering around human leaders rather than ... Jesus. It's the reason why Paul's goes on to speak of love in chapter 13. And there he says as impressive as you are, as gifted as you are, as eloquent as you are, if you're not loving each other in your differences whether cultural and socio-economic differences, you're a noisy gong, a useless horn that's just honking.

But their immaturity ran even deeper. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian is a handsome young man so physically attractive that he draws the attention of an artist who desires to make him the subject of his portrait. He tells Dorian that he has never seen a face more attractive and pure. And when the painting is finished, as Dorian looks at his portrait, he becomes enraptured by the attractiveness and beauty of his own looks. So enraptured is he by his external appearance and beauty that he begins to live a life of secret sins ... he neglects his heart... and he never gets caught. And as his life slides into great wickedness, he never ages, he continues to be attractive externally, and he never gets caught out because all of his sins gets transferred onto the picture that Dorian keeps hidden away. So all of his sins: pride, greed, sexual immorality, murder, wickedness, callousness in his dealings with people are all masked by the veneer of attractiveness and beauty. But the painting bears the scars of his hidden life of sin reflecting an ugly, foul, filthy, repulsive picture beneath an impressive, beautiful, attractive individual.

And what Paul does in 1 Corinthians is he uncovers the real picture for them. He shows them what lies beneath the surface. He shows them that they are pristine and perfect on the outside, but corrupt and dark beneath the surface. They were marked by disunity, immaturity and impurity. They had a divided leadership, members playing party politics and gathering around certain leaders in the church, factionalism, and cultural and socio-economic elitism, with members looking down on other members. Their members broke into groups around certain leaders, looked down on others in the church, despised other groups in the church, indulged in sexual immorality, hooked up with prostitutes - one member was sleeping with his mother in law, denying the resurrection, and suing each other (they had all these problems at the one time!).

And here is the tragedy which repeats itself in every generation. This is the great tragedy in the church today. Instead of a movement towards unity, maturity, and purity around Jesus, the church is marked by disunity, immaturity, and impurity around anything but Jesus.

Christians and churches can start well, but the measure of spiritual maturity is unity, maturity and purity around Jesus (Eph.4:1-16)! Consider the 'Steeple Song' (<http://www.christian-gospelmusiclyrics.com/contemporary/don-francisco/steeple-song-lyrics.html>)!

Is your leadership marked by Eph.4:1-16 ... by humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love ... marked by unity, maturity, purity around Jesus? Or are you like the Corinthian church ... marked by disunity, immaturity, impurity built around things or people.

Is your church/elders/pastors/deacons marked by Eph.4:1-16 ... by humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love ... marked by unity, maturity, purity around Jesus? Or are you like the Corinthian church ... marked by disunity, immaturity, impurity built around things or people.

Building a spiritually mature church begins with a commitment to being (being – because that is what you have been saved to and given) ... a people of humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, in unity, maturity and purity around Jesus. We're not about being Chinese, not about programs, structures, building ... but a people living in unity, maturity and purity around Jesus – because of Jesus, like Jesus and for Jesus.

Now Paul goes on to tell us two things that we need to know if we are to build rightly in our ministry and in our churches: two things you need to be aware of in your ministry, two things to remember in your church, and two things to watch for in building a strong and healthy church.

Understand the role of leadership in building the church

– 1 Corinthians 3: 5-8

Paul tells us that leaders are nothing more than servants of Jesus. They are servants of Jesus through whom God brings His people to faith, and through whom God helps His people grow. So understand your place in God's economy as a leader! Leaders are nothing more than servants through whom God is working to grow the gospel in the lives of His people. They are not rock stars but they are also not your personal servants. They serve Jesus in your life. The Corinthians had a rock star view of their pastors.

V.5 says, 'What then is Apollos? What then is Paul?' Here's the problem of Corinthian tribalism: they built their church around who they believed were successful leaders, and they measured success by the externals – i.e. the giftedness of a leader, the eloquence of a leader, and the popularity of a leader.

Who is Apollos? Some of you think he's a great speaker with a dynamic personality! **Who is Paul?** Some of you think he's your founding pastor and your first pastor! YES, they are all those things, but more than anything else, they are *servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each*. They are instruments through whom God worked to bring you to faith! That's consistent with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20, isn't it? Notice what Jesus says:

¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Notice the role of the disciples of Jesus: to teach others to observe or to obey the commands of Jesus. They are servants of Jesus whose role is to help people follow and obey Jesus! Note: Apollos, Paul, the disciples of Jesus sent out are there to serve Jesus, and to bring people to follow and obey Jesus – **they are not servants of Chinese culture/tradition ... they are servants of Jesus and the gospel in your life!**

Paul's view on leaders in the church is that they're all 'servants' of the gospel and servants of Jesus (that's who they serve): *Servants through whom you came to faith, through whom you were grounded in the gospel, through whom you were disciplined in the gospel ... through whom you believed.*

And as servants in the church, God has given each of them a task, a responsibility, a work, and a job. It has been given by the Lord Himself to serve you and to serve the ministry of the gospel in your lives. They report to the Lord, they obey the Lord's instruction, and they carry out the Lord's

work, each functioning as servants who have different responsibilities in *servicing Jesus in your life, and in the building up of the church.*

They're both needed and both are necessary. In v.6 Paul says, '*I planted, Apollos watered.*' Both are needed, and each depends on the other (Filipino or Chinese – both are needed in the church). Paul uses the analogy, or the metaphor, of the church as a field. If you want a harvest, a huge crop, or a healthy crop, what do you need? There is no point planting seeds if no one waters. There is no point watering if there are no seeds planted. There is no point fertilizing if no one is watering. And there is no point watering if no one is watching out for pests. **Both are needed, and each depends on the other in the building up of the church. The application works like this:** whether you are a Chinese or Filipino pastor, deacon or elder, small group leader, or Sunday school teacher, understand your role: **you are servants of the gospel in the lives of the people you lead**, you are BOTH servants who each have a unique part to play in serving Jesus and His gospel in the lives of those in your church, and each of you depend on the other in the building up of the people you lead (The pastor can't say 'I don't need you' and the deacon or elder can't say 'I don't need'. They are BOTH together serving Jesus). Understand the role of leadership in the building up of the church. **Leaders function as servants who have different responsibilities in servicing Jesus and his gospel in the lives of the flock. And their primary role is teaching it, guarding it, defending it in the lives of their people, and modeling it for their people.**

Titus.1:9:

⁹He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

1 Timothy 4:11-16

2 Timothy 1:13-14:

¹³Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

But there's something even more important that Paul highlights for us. In v.6: *I planted, Apollos watered, BUT God gave the growth.* Both the one who plants and the one who waters is not the focus. The one who plants and the one who waters does not hold the place of pre-eminence in the church and in the ministry (**the servant is not the focus; the Lord of the house is!**). **The focus is on God who gives the growth:** He's the one you should focus on and depend on for growth! The moment you begin to look to a program, structure, or person to grow your church ... to save your church ... to fix your churches problems, you've got a bigger problem. Look to the chief shepherd for leadership and growth and help always, because he leads his people and he brings growth in the lives of his people.

The one who plants and the one who waters is completely dependent on God. In fact, their work is useless unless God gives the growth!

Ps.127:1

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.)

IMPORTANT: For Those of You in Leadership

1) **You cannot bring growth, God does it** ... it's his work ... our job is to sow the seeds, water the plant, but God does the growing.

2) **You cannot claim credit for people's growth and success in ministry in your church** ... when numbers increase, when gifted people appear, when the Sunday school explodes with new kids, when people mature, when your church experiences blessing remember it's not your work. Give thanks to God for bringing the growth ...

3) **You must be dependent on God alone for growth.** Growth is a divine work of the Holy Spirit. You cannot change people, and you cannot bring conviction in people's lives. Only God by his Spirit can illuminate hearts and minds. As people under your care frustrated you by their lack of growth, as you look at the challenges your church will face in the coming years, as you experience the brokenness of the people of God ... do it on your knees ... in prayer depending on Him. Maybe sometimes the reason we find our churches in a state of stagnation or maintenance is because we are depending on our power and our wisdom, and not on the Lord. When was the last time your leadership instead of trying to fix their problems, gave themselves to looking to the Lord for help on their knees? Get down on your knees and ask the chief shepherd for help and growth.

4) **You and I are not the focus of the church or the ministry.** Leaders who seek to build their church around them is an exercise in foolishness ... leaders who seek to build a name for themselves in their ministry is an exercise in idolatry ... God will not share his glory with anyone

Is 42:8 *I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other.*

Is 48:11 ... *My glory I will not give to another.*

Remember what we're told about leaders in 1 Peter 5:1-4:

¹To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ²Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Elders and pastors, leaders are undershepherds serving under Jesus. You are not king, Jesus is king; you are not the chief shepherd, Jesus is the chief shepherd; you are not the sole authority, you come under His authority. The pastor is not king, but neither is the chairman of the board of deacons and elders. The pastor is not an employee, and the board of deacons and elders is not the employer. The church is not a business, and its leaders are not businessmen where Jesus is the CEO who is driving them by profit margins. The church is a flock, and its leaders are fellow servant undershepherds; the pastors, elders, deacons and lay leaders are co-workers; they are undershepherds, where Jesus is the chief shepherd, whose business is salvation and care of the sheep.

Understand this:

v.7:

*'so neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything' [they are servants of the gospel, given a job by the Lord. All you elders, deacons, pastors, and leaders; you are servants of the gospel who are given a job by Jesus; that's all you are] ... **the only one who matters is God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters are one, they are united, they share one purpose in that they are fellow workers in the gospel – serving Jesus.***

v.9:

for we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

The church is like a field. It doesn't belong to me or you; it's God's field. Hear that. The church doesn't belong to any deacon, elder, or pastor (even though some would like to think so); it's God's field. And those of us in leadership are fellow-workers in God's field (the pastor is not the only worker; he is a fellow worker); each one of us is playing our part in bringing Jesus to our people in every increasing measure!

Understand clearly the role of leadership in building a healthy and strong church. If you're a leader, you must see that your part and role is **all about serving the gospel in the lives of others**, bringing Jesus to others in the church so that they might grow, and lifting up Jesus - His work and words - in the life of others in the church; that's your job. **But also understand that the job of growth is God's alone. We are not to take His place, steal His glory, or draw attention to ourselves. We are like signs pointing people to Jesus. We are like sign post pointing people to Jesus more and more. The focus is not on the sign post, but on where the sign points – we are fellow sign posts as leaders.**

So here is a leadership job description: to serve and live to be forgotten, so that only the Lord Jesus might be remembered in the lives of the people you lead. (This is very different in many of our churches, where you'll find leaders who want to be remembered, lifted up, and publicly acknowledged, whose names are acknowledged for their work, financial contribution, and position. Jesus said in Matthew 6 that if this is you, or your deacon, elder, or pastor, then you've already got your reward; your heavenly bank account is zero. In His economy you remain a spiritual pauper!)

Secondly, Paul tells us that **to build a strong and healthy church we must build on the right foundation, and we must be very careful what we use.** And so Paul says that you must understand your role in building the church.

Understand your role in building the church vv.9-17

Paul moves and changes the analogy, or metaphor, for the church as a field, to the church as a building. He moves from agriculture to architecture. In v.9, *'you are God's field, God's building.'*

Notice what Paul goes on to say. When you build a building you need a foundation, don't you? (With every new building you need to lay down the foundations). There needs to be a superstructure; buildings fall down without a foundation! Paul spells out his role to them in v.10:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, like an architect I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it.

Paul's role in building the Corinthian church is spelled out for us (Acts 18). He planted the seeds of the gospel in the hearts of Christians in this church: He preached the death of Jesus for their sins, he held out forgiveness and salvation through faith in Jesus and His atoning work, and he laid the one foundation for a strong church in this city. Like a skilled master builder – a certified, experienced, and knowledgeable architect - he laid the foundation.

And what is this foundation? It is none other than the gospel: Jesus Christ and Him crucified (2:2: *'For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.'*) The church is built on one foundation, which is Christ crucified. It is the cross of Jesus, the atoning work of Jesus, and the gospel we saw at the start of our week! The church is built on this gospel alone that says that you and I are powerless sinners under the judgment of God, in need of

salvation; that Jesus comes and dies on the cross, taking on Himself the anger and wrath of God in our place; that Jesus rose from the dead in victory over sin and death, and that God saves us, and declares that we are right and forgiven because of what Jesus has done on the cross for us. We are made alive, raised, and seated with Jesus! (We are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, and in Jesus alone to be a trophy of his grace now and into eternity; not by any work or merit.)

And so Paul says in v.10:

Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

If you're not building upon this gospel, if this is not the centre of your church life and ministry today, if this is not the centre of your church life and ministry tomorrow or the year after that and the next 20 years - ***if you're laying down a different foundation***, and if you are not growing people's faith and trust and dependence on this gospel - then it must be some other building you're contributing to because it's not God's church you're building. If it's not Jesus and His atoning work that you're building on, then it's not Christian; you're building a cult. If you're building your church on Chinese culture or tradition, it's not Christian; it's a Chinese cult. If you're building your church on a health and wealth gospel, it's not Christian; it's a self help cult. If you're building your church on bright lights and music, it's not Christian; it's a Contemporary Christian Music cult. If you're building your church on your pastor's reputation, it's not Christian; it's a personality cult.

Notice what Paul says in v.11, '**the foundation is Christ crucified**'. Let each one take care how he builds on the foundation; make sure you aren't laying another foundation! The foundation is key, isn't it, upon which the church is built. The structure, strength, or future of the building rests on the foundation, and the security of the building rests on the foundation.

Let me labour this point - the foundation that he lays is the gospel (i.e. Christ crucified, and salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone!) The saving work of Jesus for sin is the foundation. And there can be no other foundation (Acts 4:12 says, 'there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we are saved'!) There is no tapering with it, no changing it, no replacing it, and no adding to it. (Don't deviate from this gospel. In fact, you are to grow in it. The myth is that you start with Jesus and you go on to something else. No! We don't grow people out of Jesus but into Jesus! **You start with Jesus and you grow by Him and in Him!**)

Colossians 2:6-7:

⁶Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

[Compare this to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19; 4:1-16, where he says that the trajectory of the Christian life is to be saved to treasure Jesus and grow to treasure Jesus; to know Him and be more like Him!]

The first thing Paul says about building the church is that there is only one foundation. (It's because of Jesus, all about Jesus, for Jesus, and through Jesus.)

The second thing that he says is that it takes people to build a church. Even when building a house, no architect can do it by himself, can he? There are many others who help, who have skills, who have knowledge, and who bring their experience in building a house (E.g. master carpenter, master cement renderer, or master plumber). It is the same here: Paul doesn't do it by himself. You discover that his work is only one part in the work of building the church, '*I laid the foundation and someone else builds on it.*' And here you must understand your role.

And YOUR role, in v.10 - whether you are the leader, pastor, elder, deacon, or member – is to: *‘let each one take care how he builds upon it – let each one take care how he builds upon the gospel in this church.’*

The problem in Corinth is that they are beginning to tamper with the foundation. They are taking their eyes off Jesus and His gospel and replacing it, and finding their identity, in their leaders; they are adding to it, and finding their sense of power, in displays of wealth and influence which divided their church community; they added to the gospel by finding their identity in the externals, what looks impressive, and what they identified with as externally important. And it’s all leading others away from the work of Jesus!

There is a right way and a wrong way to build a church. So you must now read vv.12-15 as a warning and a caution. Remember the story of *The Three Little Pigs*; are you building hay, sticks, or bricks? As you contribute to the life and growth of your church, as you serve in the work of ministry, and as you lead those under your care, **how are you building? What are you building on? What are you building with?**

10 Let each man take care how he builds. ¹¹For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — ¹³each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

There are two things to remember:

1) Build on Jesus and His Saving Work Alone

In v.11, Paul says to not replace or add to this foundation. It should always point people back to the gospel, and help them find relevance, strength, hope, identity, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His work for them.

Here is the new reality. You’ve been made alive with Christ, raised to new life with Christ, and now reigning with Christ. If this is the new reality, what is the new normality? It’s a life of love, humility, unity across cultures, maturity, purity in this new community called the church built around Jesus alone! That is the trajectory of what should be the norm in the church.

In your relationships with those under your care, are you magnifying Christ, in Jesus breaking down the barriers of racial and cultural hostility? In your Bible study groups are you drawing people to love Jesus and his saving work more and more? When you meet with people before and after church, are you drawing their hearts and minds back to the gospel? As you hear people struggle with sin, do you remind them of the grace of God in Jesus? As you encounter differences in culture and personalities, do you remind them of their shared identity in Christ whether Chinese or Filipino or English speaking or Chinese speaking?

As you counsel people struggling with doubt, do you bring them hope and confidence that comes out of the gospel of Jesus and him crucified? As you hear workers get caught up in the career life, do you remind them of the saving work of Jesus and the eternal priorities of heaven and hell that spring from the gospel? As your elders and deacons meet, are they reminding each other of the new reality in Christ and the new normality that is to mark their lives and those they lead?

The church is not built on personality, psychology, motivational preaching, positive thinking, management skills, emotional experiences, human ability, or even on buildings. It is built on the powerful, ongoing, and repeated proclamation of Jesus and His saving work! (Paul says that Christ crucified is his only boast!) It takes resolve, focus, and commitment, to keep Jesus and His work alone at the centre, focus, and foundation of our church

2) Watch the Quality of Your Work

¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — ¹³each one's work will become manifest (exposed), for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

As you serve in ministry and lead God's people, Paul says the quality of your work matters to the Lord. Here we are told to watch the quality of our work. Here is Paul's warning: there will be a day of testing - a final day of fire and judgment, and a final day of testing by fire that will consume everything. It will reveal the quality of your work in building His church (To all you deacons, elders, pastors, youth group leaders, Sunday school teachers your work will be tested) - when the quality of your part in growing His church will be exposed. The kind of material you used in building His church will be seen; be it with gold, silver, precious stones, or wood, hay and straw. What each generation builds, what every leader builds, and what each member builds, will be tested by fire: the fire of the risen Christ who will consume everything, revealing its true worth and value.

It's not just a matter of what you are building on, but also what you are building with *and whether it is consistent with the foundation*; whether what you build with is in line with the foundation. Even where the foundation is the gospel, and even where the foundation is Jesus and His cross, there is always the danger of poor workmanship and cheap and useless materials being used. For example, my experience of buying toys at Two Dollar Shop: You can buy a G.I. Joe for 70 pesos made in China. And it works just like a G.I. Joe doll made by Mattel which cost 550 pesos. But you can tell that it's cheap. It had rough edges, parts that came off and you have to push them back in, and the coloring is not accurate – it's got a monobrow. It functions and works; it's a G.I. Joe. But it's made poorly and it has cheap material. It's not consistent with the quality that befits G.I. Joe, who doesn't come apart when pounded and smashed! It's not worthy of G.I. Joe's calling to be indestructible! Paul says the same thing of our calling and living a life worthy of our calling in Jesus, our foundation. There are two ways to build **because one will last and the other will not, one is valuable and one is worthless.**

The difference between gold, silver, precious stones, and wood, hay and straw, is that one is lasting and the other is burned up. One is consistent with the beauty and worth of the foundation – Christ crucified – and the other is not consistent with the foundation.

It's not just a matter of serving in ministry, it's not just a matter of using your gifts to serve the gospel, it's not just a matter of financially supporting the work of ministry, it's not just a matter of leading a Bible study, it's not just a matter of meeting up with people, it's not just a matter of getting together for brunch in a mother's group, and it's not just a matter of running a men's fellowship. **What matters is whether those works of service are consistent with the gospel, and whether they are in line with the gospel!**

I say this because you can live in such a way where your life and service, and what you build at church, has little or nothing to do with Jesus. (You can live in such a way that your ministry and leadership, and what you build at church, has little or nothing to do with Jesus. This is the warning

at the end of Matthew 7. The new reality is that Jesus is Lord. But if this not your normality where you are living in disobedience to Jesus, then the reality is that Jesus is not Lord in your life)

And Paul says that there will come a day of fire that will consume everything. Everything we have done to exalt man rather than Jesus, everything we have done to please people rather than Jesus, everything we have done out of selfish ambition, everything we have done to draw attention to ourselves rather than Jesus, everything we have done to feed our ego rather than the glory of Jesus, everything we have done to push our own agendas rather than Jesus, and everything we have done in ministry to elevate ourselves rather than Jesus, **will all be consumed and burnt up in the fires of judgment** (it will be exposed as worthless, empty, waste, wood, hay, and straw).

The only things left - the gold, silver, and precious stones in the building of your church – will be things that were done for the glory of Jesus; the things that were about Jesus and His glory, the things that saw Jesus lifted up, the things that got people loving Jesus, the things that drew people towards Jesus, and the things we did to lift Jesus up in our lives, ministries to others, and our service to others, in the building up of His church. **That will be the only thing that will last when final judgment comes.**

Paul says that you should watch how you build. Whatever you do in your church that lifts Jesus up will last. Whatever you do that exalts Jesus, and points people to Jesus, will last. Everything else is worthless. If you are going to build His church and move forward, well and strong, resolve today to **let it be for Jesus, and about Jesus and His saving work**. Let it be with gold, silver, and precious stones that are consistent with the foundation.

To the Small Group leader: You should build a group that finds its hope and focus and treasure in Jesus. That's building with gold, silver, and precious stones!

To Youth Ministry or Sunday school: Let it not be about keeping kids occupied or baby-sitting, but making it a ministry that exalts Christ in the lives of your young people. That's gold, silver, and precious stones.

To the Praise and Worship team: It is not about filling in the gaps before or after the sermon, or about drawing attention to the cool musicians or great music, but about making it a ministry that brings the spotlight on Jesus when we meet. That's gold, silver, and precious stones.

To the Welcoming team: It is not about giving people opportunities to serve because there's nothing else for them to do in the church, but making it a ministry that brings the spotlight on Jesus by welcoming people, and making them feel at home when they meet with us, so that they might focus on Jesus in a loving environment. That's gold, silver, and precious stones.

The Board of Elders meeting: It is not about maintaining the budget, saving money, or maintaining Chinese culture. It is all about serving as fellow undershepherds to Jesus; in bringing His people to a life of humility, maturity, purity and unity around Jesus as our treasure in life above all things. That's gold, silver, and precious stones.

John Piper says:

There is only one foundation: Christ. And who **he is** controls the shape and quality of the church. In other words what Paul is doing with the new image of the church as a building is the same thing he did with the image of the church as a field. **He is exalting Christ as absolutely pre-eminent**. Not only is he at the bottom of it all holding it up; his influence

must be utterly pervasive. **Everywhere you turn in the church, wherever anybody is teaching anything or building anything, we must see the mark of Jesus Christ! Whatever lifts up Christ in his true greatness is gold and silver and precious stone; and whatever detracts from the fullness of his truth is wood, hay, and stubble.**

Everything must be an expression of the gospel of Jesus and Him crucified - everything must be an expression of the gospel of Jesus, who loved me and died for me - in all my conversations, relationships, serving, ministry, and leadership. That is what it means to build in this church with gold, silver, and precious stones. Are you building with gold, silver, and precious stones? Will you build with gold, silver, and precious stones? Anything else is wood, hay, and stubble. They are worthless, rubbish, and fit for the dump. And oh the amount of wood, hay, and stubble in our churches! What are you building with?

Conclusion

Resolve to make sure that Jesus and his saving work is the foundation of your church, it's life and its ministry. Guard it, remind yourselves of it, remind others of it, come back to it over and over again.

Resolve to make sure that Jesus and his saving work is the foundation of your leadership, your pastoral ministry - in your life, in your service, in your ministry, in everything you do as a leader.

Resolve to make sure you make it all about Jesus and his saving work. Let Jesus be your only boast and glory and let's your church be known only for Jesus and his saving work.