

“THE CHURCH BELONGS TO GOD”

I. Introduction

- A. When John Calvin died at the age of fifty-four, he was buried at a secret location in an unmarked grave, in accordance with instructions that he had given beforehand.
1. The reason for his instructions can be seen in a line that he wrote while commenting on the death and burial of Moses.
 2. He said, “It is good that famous men be buried in unmarked graves.”
 3. While Calvin died with little wealth and in poor health, he was famous.
 4. He did not want people making pilgrimages to his grave.
 5. He did not want his death to be an occasion for the obscuring of God’s glory.
 6. So he took measures to prevent people from making him the object of their veneration.
- B. Calvin’s handling of that matter is reflective of the point that the apostle Paul is making in these verses from 1 Corinthians 3.
1. As we have already seen in our study of this letter, the church in Corinth was having a problem with factionalism.
 2. Some believers were claiming superiority over other believers because they identified with the personalities, styles, or reputations of certain Christian leaders.

3. There was a Paul group, an Apollos group, a Peter group — even a Jesus group.
4. Back in chapter 1, Paul explained that factionalism is in conflict with the unity of Christ's church.
5. Here in chapter 3, Paul shows how factionalism loses sight of the fact that the church belongs to God.

II. God Wants His People to Be Spiritual (1-4)

- A. Our text begins by continuing with the theme that was the focus in chapter 2.
 1. In that chapter, Paul explained that the wisdom of God that is set forth in the gospel can only be received by those who are filled with the Spirit of God.
 2. The Holy Spirit is the one through whom God's truth is revealed, and he is the one by whom people are enabled to receive that truth.
 3. This is the idea that lies behind the term "spiritual people" in verse 1 of our text.
 4. It is important to understand that Paul is not using the word "spiritual" in the way many people in our culture use this word.
 5. When people today refer to themselves as "spiritual," they often mean that they have an interest in exploring and connecting with forces and energies that are greater than themselves, but only as long as they have control over what it is that they are seeking.
 6. To be "spiritual" in this sense is to be gnostic, to look for the divine within you.
 7. This is the exact opposite of what the Bible means when it speaks of being spiritual.

8. When Paul uses the term “spiritual people,” he means people who are enabled by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to live in submission to the God who exists outside of them and who has revealed himself and his will in his Word.
 9. This is made clear when we compare our passage with chapter 2:14-15, where Paul contrasted two modes of human existence, referring to “the natural person” and “the spiritual person.”
 10. The natural person is man in his fallen condition, man in bondage to sin.
 11. The spiritual person is man in his redeemed estate, man renewed by and filled with the Holy Spirit.
- B. In our text, Paul says that he was not able to address the Corinthians as spiritual people back when he started his ministry among them, which was about five years before he wrote this letter.
1. Though they had been converted to Christ, they were still “people of the flesh” and “infants in Christ.”
 2. The phrase “of the flesh” describes unregenerate human nature, so it might seem odd that Paul would refer to Christians in this way.
 3. He does so because he is saying that they were not acting like Christians.
 4. They were spiritually immature.
 5. They were worldly-minded when they should have been spiritually-minded.
 6. But this is not just a reference to something in the past.
 7. Paul says that they are still immature, even though he had spent eighteen months with them and even though Apollos had

ministered among them after Paul left Corinth.

- C. Because of their spiritual immaturity, they still have to be treated like spiritual infants.
 - 1. They should be ready for solid food, but they are still limited to milk.
 - 2. In saying this, Paul is speaking of the manner and form of his instruction, rather than the substance of what he taught them.
 - 3. The spiritually mature do not need to be taught something that is substantially different than what the spiritually immature need to be taught.
 - 4. Both need to be taught the same truths, but they have to be taught according to their capacity.
 - 5. In the Corinthians' case, this meant that Paul had to spend a lot of time confronting them and rebuking them for continuing to think and act in such a worldly manner.

- D. The general lesson that we are taught in the first four verses of this chapter is that God calls those who belong to his church to think and act differently than those who belong to the world.
 - 1. To use Paul's terms, God wants us to be "spiritual" rather than "merely human."
 - 2. There are many areas in which we can fall prey to behaving in a "merely human" manner.
 - 3. Whenever our thinking or behavior is shaped by ideas that are in conflict with what God has revealed in his Word, we are being merely human.
 - 4. This is not how Christians are supposed to live.

5. The governing principle in our lives is not to be fallen human nature, but the indwelling Holy Spirit.
6. We are called to live more and more under the influence of the Spirit of God, and less and less under the influence of our fallen desires and the assumptions that are widely held in our fallen world.
7. But this doesn't just happen automatically for Christians.
8. Spiritual maturity only comes as we make diligent use of the instrumental means that God uses to bring about spiritual growth.
9. If you want to grow as a spiritual person, you need to read, listen to, and meditate on God's Word.
10. You need to bring your thinking and your behavior under the sway of that Word.
11. You need to use the sacraments to confirm your trust in the Word.
12. And you need to make the truths of the Word a subject of fervent and regular prayer.

III. God Makes the Church Grow (5-9)

- A. We turn now to verses 5 through 9, where the focus shifts to the fact that God is the one who makes his church grow.
 1. Paul employs an agricultural metaphor in these verses.
 2. He likens the church to a field, and himself and Apollos to laborers in that field.
 3. Notice that he begins not by asking '*Who* is Apollos?' and '*Who* is Paul?', but by asking *what* they are.
 4. Unlike the Corinthians, he is not focusing on their personalities.

5. He is focusing on their office and on the specific tasks that God assigned to them.
 6. Even though Paul and Apollos were engaged in the same gospel ministry, they were given different assignments in that ministry.
 7. Paul's work of establishing the church in Corinth was like planting seeds in a field.
 8. Apollos' work of nurturing the church in Corinth after Paul's departure was like watering those seeds.
 9. Both tasks are necessary elements in the same overall project.
 10. They are also dependent on each other.
 11. If the seed isn't planted, watering the field won't do any good.
 12. And if the seed isn't watered, crops won't grow.
- B. Both Paul and Apollos were instrumental in the establishment and growth of the church in Corinth.
1. And the key word here is "instrumental."
 2. These two men were instruments in God's hands.
 3. God worked through them, just as he works through other faithful ministers, but God is the one who gave spiritual life and spiritual growth.
 4. This is why it makes no sense to treat Paul and Apollos as figureheads of different factions in the church.
 5. That is a merely human way of thinking about the church.

6. It is to regard the church as an institution whose origin and development depends on human acumen and skill.
 7. But that is not what the church is.
 8. God is the one who brings people to faith, who nurtures people in faith, and who keeps people in faith.
 9. While he does this work through ministers, they are simply servants who are called faithfully to proclaim what they have been given.
- C. After making this point, Paul moves on to discuss the wages that God gives to his laborers.
1. God incentivizes faithfulness and diligence in ministry by promising to reward it.
 2. There are other passages that tell us that this principle also applies to the Christian life in general.
 3. Of course, these wages cannot be considered something that we have merited.
 4. After all, it is only by God's power that we can render any service to him, and it is only by God's power that our service produces any fruit.
 5. The reward is graciously given.
 6. It is a matter of God adding a further gift to the gifts that he has already given us.
- D. Paul also tells us that the wages are given in varying degrees, corresponding to the labor that is performed.
1. In other words, there will be degrees of reward in heaven.

2. This does not mean that those whose reward is less than that of others will be unhappy or envious.
3. Everyone in heaven will have a full measure of joy, but that measure will be given according to our varying capacities.
4. This should motivate us to be zealous in our service and obedience to the Lord.
5. The more we strive to honor and glorify him with our lives now, the more we will be able to enjoy him throughout eternity.

IV. Christ Is the Church's One Foundation (10-15)

- A. This brings us to the final paragraph in our text, which begins in verse 10.
 1. This section expands upon the change in metaphor that was introduced in verse 9, where Paul referred to the church as "God's building."
 2. If the church is a structure, then Paul can describe himself as a skilled master builder, an architect.
 3. Paul and the other apostles gave the foundational testimony upon which the church is being built.
 4. And it is not a matter of boasting for Paul to speak of himself this way, because this was the task that was graciously assigned to him by God.
 5. As Paul says in verse 10, he laid a foundation "According to the grace of God given to me."
- B. The foundation that Paul laid in his apostolic ministry was Jesus Christ.
 1. Listen to how Paul described his foundation-laying work in the previous chapter: "And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or

wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

2. Notice the special emphasis upon the message of the cross.
 3. Paul preached Christ and him crucified.
 4. This shows us that the foundation upon which the church is built is not merely Jesus’ ethical teaching and moral example.
 5. As important as those things are, they become a false foundation if they are separated from the message of the cross.
 6. Were it not for the cross, we would still be in our sins.
 7. We would still be subject to the wrath and curse of God.
 8. This is why the true church of Jesus Christ confesses that Jesus died on the cross as our substitute in order to satisfy the demands of God’s justice on our behalf.
- C. Continuing with this metaphor of the church as God’s building, Paul says that while he laid the foundation through his apostolic preaching, someone else is now building on that foundation.
1. Who is this “someone else”?
 2. We might think that it is Apollos since he was mentioned in the preceding paragraph, but it is not him.
 3. Apollos did minister in Corinth after Paul left, but 1 Corinthians 16 explicitly says that he was not in Corinth when Paul wrote this letter.
 4. The “someone else” to whom Paul refers in verse 10 is a leader or a group of leaders in the church in Corinth.

5. In light of the warnings that Paul issues in the following verses, it is likely that this is in reference to those who were stirring up division in the church.
 6. These people were replacing the secret and hidden wisdom of God that is made known in the gospel, with a message of mere human wisdom.
 7. It is a constant temptation for the church to do this sort of thing.
 8. We find ourselves being pressured to rethink the church's beliefs and practices in light of the things that are so widely assumed in our surrounding culture.
 9. Paul's teaching in these verses reminds us why it is so important for us to resist this temptation.
 10. Only the truth of God will endure.
 11. To mix the wisdom of men with the wisdom of God is like mixing layers of marble and straw in a construction project.
 12. If you do that, you will compromise the stability of the entire structure.
- D. When Paul speaks of "the Day" in verse 13, he is clearly referring to the day of judgment.
1. On that day, the truth or falsehood of all the things that the church has taught and done will be made known.
 2. There are people who are attracted to the church through worldly strategies and teachings yet do not trust in Christ as he is revealed in the gospel.
 3. On the last day, such people will hear Jesus speak these words to them: "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of

lawlessness.” (Mt. 7:23)

4. Moreover, everything that is impure in the church, everything that is out of sync with the foundational truth upon which the church is built — these things will not survive the fires of judgment.
 5. In the words of Charles Hodge, “False doctrine can no more stand the test of the day of judgment, than hay or stubble can stand a raging conflagration.”
- E. When Paul says in verse 15 that on that day some will have their work burned up but will themselves still be saved, he is not talking about the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory.
1. I mention this because there are some Roman Catholic teachers who cite this verse to support that teaching.
 2. This is clearly not what Paul is speaking of here.
 3. In this context, the fire is not a symbol of purification but of judgment.
 4. Paul is issuing a warning to the church, and especially to its ministers.
 5. He is telling us that we need to be careful that the church’s ministry is conducted in a manner that is consistent with the church’s apostolic foundation.
 6. It is true that Paul does acknowledge that if there are true believers who misguidedly adopt worldly methods and ideas, they themselves will survive the judgment.
 7. Nevertheless, such believers will find that the things in which they invested so much of their time and energy in this life will not survive the judgment.

V. Conclusion

- A. One of the recurring themes in contemporary Christian literature is the urgent need to rethink everything about the church.
- B. Listen to the way theologian David Wells responds to that mindset: “The church is not our creation. It is not our business... The church, in fact, was never our idea in the first place. No, it is not the church we need to rethink. Rather, it is our thoughts about the church that need to be rethought... What we need to do, then, first and foremost, is to think God’s thoughts after him, think about the church in a way that replicates his thoughts about it.” [*The Courage to Be Protestant*, 189, 190]
- C. This is what the apostle Paul is urging us to do in these verses.
- D. May God grant us the grace to do so, that we might bring greater glory and honor to his name.