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*Rethinking a Much Abused Text:
1 Corinthians 3:1-15*



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1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-15 ABUSED

The Carnal Christian Teaching (3:1-4)

The founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary (originally The Evangelical Theological College), Lewis Sperry Chafer (D.D.), published *He That Is Spiritual*¹ in 1918. In that work, now dubbed in its reprinted subtitle, "A Classic Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Spirituality," he gave full exposition to the "carnal Christian" teaching, which had been briefly articulated in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, just one year before.²

In Chafer's work, he opens up the first chapter with "Three Classes of Men." Chafer based his teaching on 1 Corinthians. 2:9-3:4. He states:

The Apostle Paul, by the Spirit, has divided the whole human family into three groups: (1) The "natural man," who is unregenerate, or unchanged spiritually; (2) the "carnal man," who is a "babe in Christ," and walks "as a man"; and (3) the "spiritual" man.³

In that opening chapter, Chafer describes the "carnal Christian" in the following terms:

Though saved, the carnal Christians are walking "according to the course of this world." They are "carnal" because the flesh is dominating them (see Romans 7:14). . . . The objectives and affections are centered in the same unspiritual sphere as that of the "natural" man.⁴

According to Chafer, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, is teaching that a saved person can be under the dominion of sin. Amazingly he uses Romans 7:14 to support this idea! Further, he asserts that a regenerate man may have his objectives and affections completely untouched by the regenerating grace of the Spirit! Finally, he summarizes, "There are two great spiritual changes which are possible to human experience—the change from the 'natural' man to the saved man, and the change from the 'carnal' man to the 'spiritual' man."⁵

Lewis Sperry Chafer had claimed to be "strictly Calvinistic."⁶ Yet, his teaching in *He That Is Spiritual* departed from a traditional Reformed understanding of the work of salvation, and, as B. B. Warfield rightly stated, Chafer's teaching comes from the "laboratory of John Wesley" and is "incurably Arminian."⁷ Unfortunately, Chafer's "carnal Christian" teaching from 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, gained widespread acceptance, and has been given new life time and again. One of the most popular heirs of the Chaferian interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 is Charles Ryrie. Ryrie even marshals Herman Bavinck and John Calvin in support of making a distinction between the carnal believer and the spiritual believer.⁸

What is important to notice is that Chafer, and those who have followed him, have taken 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 and used it to justify that there are actually three classes or kinds of people: natural, spiritual, and carnal. In Chafer's scheme, there are two types or kinds of Christians, those who are spiritual and those who are carnal.

Furthermore, what characterizes this "carnal" Christian is that his life can be completely unchanged; his objectives and affections can remain untransformed. There is no observable difference between him and the natural man. He can be walking according to the course of this world. In fact, he can even

be completely indifferent to the work of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Certainly there are other related problems with Chafer's teaching—for instance, regarding the nature of man, the nature of regeneration and sanctification. However, for our purpose we are simply focusing on his use of 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 to justify the "carnal Christian" doctrine.

The Bema Seat and Rewards (3:10-15)

This teaching on three classes of men is often coupled with the next passage, 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. What is often asserted within the carnal Christian teaching is that there will be a separate judgment for believers, where their works are evaluated and they will receive rewards. The usual assumption is that those who were spiritual will receive a reward, those who were carnal will be saved "as by fire."

Joe Wall, president of Colorado Christian University, wrote a popular level book titled, *Going for the Gold, Reward and Loss at the Judgment of Believers* (Moody, 1991). The entire book is devoted to this idea that believers will have their own judgment and should live life motivated by reward.

Because of Christ's perfect payment for sin at the cross, the only other judgment facing the Christian is the judgment seat of Christ, or the bema. The issue of our eternal salvation is already settled. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Our entrance into His eternal kingdom is secure, without a doubt!¹⁰

Wall goes on to describe the judgment process using 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. The Christian's works are simply a matter of reward.¹¹ This follows the teaching of Lewis Sperry Chafer. Chafer dealt with this section of Scripture in two places in his *magnum opus*, *Systematic Theology*.¹² Note how Chafer uses the text directly for believers:

Reference is thus made, not to salvation, but to the works in which the Christian engages. It is not character building, but Christian service. There are, again, two general classes of super-

structure being built upon Christ the Rock, and these are likened to gold, silver, and precious stone, on the one hand, and to wood, hay and stubble, on the other hand. . . It is declared, however, that the believer who suffers loss in respect to his reward for service will himself be saved, though passing through that fire which destroys his unworthy service.¹³

This interpretation has gained widespread acceptance through Chafer and others who have followed in this school of thought. It has been popularized by books, such as Wall's, and through the *Ryrie Study Bible*. Ryrie notes, "This passage refers to the judgment seat of Christ. The works discussed here have nothing to do with earning or losing salvation. The rewards (or loss of them) pertain to Christians only."¹⁴

It is important to summarize the major points that emerge from this teaching on 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. (1) It is a unique judgment for Christians; (2) It focuses only on Christian service or good works; (3) It is only a matter of reward or loss of reward. This teaching fits in neatly with the carnal Christian teaching. The idea is that a person could live life with little or no works, and at this special Christian judgment would still get to heaven, without any rewards.

Exegetical and Pastoral Observations

My personal evaluation of these two teachings, derived from 1 Corinthians 3:1-15, is that they are not only exegetically indefensible, but also pernicious doctrines. The exegetical observation will be dealt with in the next section, where we will closely examine the text in its context. The other observation, that these are both pernicious doctrines, comes from a theological and pastoral perspective. These doctrines have been used to instill in people the notion that they can have true faith and yet be carnal and fruitless. The worst thing that can happen to such people is that they lose out on millennial rewards. This is not a hypothetical observation, it is one that I have heard many times over the years. A presumptuous laziness can creep in, making people comfortable with their carnality and fruitlessness. What makes this so danger-

ous is that it gives ground for people to think they are converted, when in fact they may well be unregenerate and hell-bound.

My contention is that 1 Corinthians 3:1-15 has been abused by Chafer and others. The abuse of this passage has been tragic and remains with us to this day. It is my purpose in the next section to lay out a clear exegetical exposition of the text, and then conclude with some doctrinal and practical implications.

AN EXEGESIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-17¹⁵

1. Introduction

Paul's initial concern regarding the Corinthian church was an arrogant party spirit (1:10-17). Fee is certainly right when he observes,

The great issue for Paul is not the division itself; that is merely a symptom. The greater issue is the threat posed to the gospel; and along with that to the nature of the church and its apostolic ministry. Thus, in a more profound way than is usually recognized, this opening issue is the most crucial factor in the letter, not because their 'quarrels' were the most significant error in the church, but because the nature of this particular strife had as its root cause their false theology, which had exchanged the theology of the cross for a false triumphalism that went beyond, or excluded the cross.¹⁶

This divisiveness, based on their "infantile status seeking" and "preacher worship," is attacked head on by Paul with the gospel itself (1:18-2:5). Paul extols the glory of the cross as the wisdom and power of God (1:18-25). It was the power of the gospel which came to them through the foolish medium of preaching and it has made them what they are (1:26-31). If there is to be any boast, it should not be in themselves or their favorite preacher, it should be in the Lord, by whose sovereign grace they were in Christ (1:30-31). Paul then gives a wonderful summary of this argument by reminding the Corinthians,

who loved to glory in the human instruments, that he came simply preaching Christ and him crucified (2:1-2). Paul only brought weakness and fear and trembling (2:3). What happened in Corinth was the demonstration of the Spirit and power (2:4-5).

Paul's second attack on the arrogant party spirit of the Corinthians is to show them how contrary such attitudes are not only to the gospel but to divine wisdom and spirituality (2:6-16). The words Paul uses are no doubt Corinthian catchwords: "wisdom" (*sophia*), "the mature" (*teleiois*), "the spiritual" (*pneumatikois*). Thiselton observes:

Paul takes up the major catchwords which had become embedded in the life of the church at Corinth, and his most urgent task at this point is neither to reject their validity nor to bypass what was important for readers, but to reclaim the terms for the gospel by redefining them in light of the nature of God and the gospel.¹⁷

Paul's argument wonderfully undermines the Corinthians' arrogance concerning how wise, mature and spiritual they were. Real wisdom is found in the gospel. This wisdom is truly for the "mature." It is Christ-centered, gospel truth which the "spiritual" really understand. Paul defines these terms in such a way as to demonstrate that real wisdom, maturity and spirituality is in discernment and having the mind of Christ (2:14-16).

The next section (3:1-17) also fits into Paul's frontal attack on the Corinthians' false theology. Paul now unfolds how unspiritual, indeed carnal, it is to be divided (3:1-4). He then sketches the image of a field and the laborers, in order to re-focus the Corinthian perspective on the ministry and ministers (3:6-9). From there he proceeds to the imagery of the church as a building and the necessity of careful workmanship in light of future judgment (3:10-15). Finally he concludes with a solemn warning (3:16-17).

Fee brings into focus the unity of Paul's argument:

The argument that began as a directive against quarrels and division (1:10-13) appears at first glance to have gone astray in what followed in 1:17-2:16. As we noted, however, the long discussion of wisdom and the cross is not a digression, but almost certainly the real issue. The church is indeed at stake, but even more so is the gospel itself. The wisdom that they are now pursuing strips the gospel of its real power; at the same time, their very pursuit of it has led to the divisions. With this paragraph, therefore, Paul makes the transition from the one argument (over the nature of the gospel and the meaning of true "wisdom") to the other (about division in the name of leaders).¹⁸

2. The Incompatibility of True Spirituality and Division (3:1-4)

This brief paragraph is pointed application. Division is contrary to the message of the gospel (1:18-2:5). Division is contrary to true maturity and spirituality (2:6-16). The Corinthians claim to be mature and spiritual; the fact is they are not (3:1-4). Paul begins the paragraph with "And I" (*kago*), which probably has the force of "as for my part."¹⁹ Paul is calling to attention his own personal ministry among the Corinthians (2:1-5) in order to drive home the Corinthians' immaturity. This is further emphasized by the aorist verbs in the paragraph.

"I was not able to speak to you as spiritual (*pneumatikois*) but as carnal (*sarkinois*), as babes (*napiois*) in Christ." The use of "flesh" and "spirit" words is fundamental to Paul's soteriological structure. As Ridderbos has noted, "Rather, 'flesh' and 'Spirit' represent two modes of existence, on the one hand that of the old aeon which is characterized and determined by the flesh, on the other that of the new creation which is of the Spirit of God."²⁰ Paul is not denying that the Corinthians have the Spirit, he is simply pointing out that when he was with them and tried to teach them, he was not able to address them as "spiritual people," that is, people who are living in the light of the new creation, illumined by the Spirit, liberated from blinding effects of the flesh and the world.

Paul describes the Corinthians' problem of not being able

speak to them as spiritual in terms of being "as carnal" and "as babes" in Christ. Although some of the lexicons and commentaries make no distinction between *sarkinos* (3:1) and *sarkikos* (3:3), it does seem best to see a nuanced difference based on the "as carnal" in 3:1 and the double "you are fleshly" in 3:3. The nuanced difference is brought out by Moulton, "The distinction in meaning between adjectives in *-ikos* and those in *-inos* is generally maintained, the former connoting . . . -like, and the latter *made of* . . . It corresponds to that found in the English suffixes *-y* and *-en*: e.g., *leathery*, *leathern*, *earthy*, *earthen*."²¹ Kistemaker also maintains the nuance, "Thus the expression fleshly (*sarkinos*) refers to the essence or substance of flesh, while the term fleshly (*sarkikos*) describes the appearance and characteristics. The first term states an unchangeable substance; the second a characteristic that can be altered."²²

The Apostle's criticism of the Corinthians is that although they claimed to be spiritual, they were not acting like it. In fact, they were acting "as carnal" people, that is, people of the flesh, people of this world. Their behavior was not only worldly, it was infantile. This is brought out by the derogatory "as babes in Christ." They claimed to be "mature" but the hard fact was that they were infantile, childish. In our vernacular, they were "acting like babies."

The next verse explains Paul's criticism. "I gave you milk, not food. For you were not yet able. But neither yet now are you able." This verse has often been construed along these lines: Paul wanted to go deeper with the Corinthians, he had given them the milk of the gospel, and wanted to give the meaty doctrine, but they were unable to digest it.²³ However, this misses the point, especially in light of the context (1:18–2:16).

Fee identifies the issue when he says,

The argument of 2:6-16 implies that for Paul the gospel of the crucified one is both "milk" and "solid food." As milk it is the good news of salvation; as solid food it is understanding that the entire Christian life is predicated on the same reality- and those who have the Spirit should so understand the "mystery."

Thus the Corinthians do not need a change of diet but a change in perspective. As Morna Hooker nicely puts it: "Yet while he uses their language, the fundamental contrast in Paul's mind is not between two quite different diets which he has to offer, but between the true food of the Gospel with which he has fed them (whether milk of meat) and the synthetic substitutes which the Corinthians have preferred."²⁴

Paul is not chastising the Corinthians because they were babes in the faith and had not progressed like they should. He chastises them because their attitudes were childish, completely incompatible with the fact that they were people who had the Spirit of God. "The Corinthians are involved in a lot of unchristian behavior; in that sense they are 'unspiritual,' not because they lack the Spirit but because they are thinking and living just like those who do."²⁵

Nevertheless, Paul does not imply that their carnality is universal, but rather localized to one serious and destructive area, their arrogant party-spirit. Paul is not saying that they are completely carnal, he is pointing out that in this area they are acting like normal men (3:3b–4). He is telling them that they have the characteristics of the flesh. He then points out that this is the source of their jealousy and rivalry. In acting like this Paul could ask, "are you not being only too human?" (3:4b, NJB).

Thiselton summarizes the problem as it is described in 3:1-4.

However, claims to be Christ-like cannot be sustained among those whose desire for status and self-esteem leads them to rivalries. Where envy and strife are in evidence, Paul is reluctant to use the word "spiritual." He does not deny that committed Christians may behave in infantile ways. The church is a school for sinners, not a museum for saints. . . . To be sure, in many instances an incongruous gap appears between what God has made the Christian's status as a new creation in Christ and the Christian's lifestyle which may lag behind it.²⁶

3. Proper Understanding of Ministerial Roles (3:5-9)

In light of the Corinthians' party spirit, their jealousy and rivalry ("my teacher teaches more wisdom than yours"), Paul now labors to put the ministry and her ministers into their proper place. "This paragraph attempts, by way of analogy, to disabuse them of this perception."²⁷ Paul is going to use agricultural imagery, and then transition into architecture. Both metaphors will make the point clearly. By the time he is done, he will present the ministry in such a way that the Corinthians should be kept from preacher worship and preacher bashing.

"Therefore what is Apollos? And what is Paul?" The neuter pronoun (*ti*) is designed to do exactly what it sounds like. The question is not "*who* is Apollos? *Who* is Paul?" but "*What* is Apollos? *What* is Paul?" "The neuter *what* signifies the low-status vocabulary of things, tools, or instruments, the status of which is entirely to serve the interests of the user."²⁸ Paul answers his own question using language that the triumphalistic "super-apostles" of 2 Corinthians would never dream of using, "servants through whom you believed." Paul uses "servants" (*diakanoi*) to keep the ministry in perspective. Ministers are servants, just like the one who sent them (Mark 10:45). They are channels and attendants, not icons to be boasted over! They are God's instruments, through which *he* brings people to faith.

The next phrase is exceptionally difficult. Literally it can be translated, "And to each as the Lord gave." This could refer to the gift of faith that God gave to each Corinthian who had believed. It could also refer to the differing tasks that God has given to each servant. It is certainly true that "their faith was no more the Corinthians' own achievement than it was the work of their evangelists; it was the gift of God."²⁹ As Barrett observes, this would fit the context nicely, but "Paul is not concerned here (as he is elsewhere) to make the point that man cannot create his own faith. 'Each one' refers to the preachers, or servants; *to each one* was assigned a task, *as the Lord gave it*, and each person performed his own duty."³⁰ This is more fitting for the context, in that it speaks of the subordi-

nation of each servant to God in his own task. The Corinthians cannot boast about Paul, or Peter, or Apollos, because they were simply doing what God had assigned.

Paul now demonstrates how the ministers of the church work in concert with each others. "I planted, Apollos watered." Both verbs are in the aorist and focus on the work of these two servants in their specific and limited acts of ministry among the Corinthians. The important fact is however, marked by the "but" (*alla*); "but God went on giving the increase." Paul switches to the imperfect, indicating that "ministers come and go, but God's own work continues."³¹

Paul in his typical theocentric style puts it plainly, "So then, neither the one planting, nor the one watering is anything, but God who gives the increase" (3:7). "Without God's prior activity in bringing them to faith and causing them to grow, there is no church at all. Hence the point is clear: Stop quarreling over those whose tasks are nothing in comparison with the activity of God. Focus on him alone, he alone saves and sanctifies."³²

In order to bend this nail over, Paul then shows the unity and diversity of the servants. "The one planting and also the one watering are one, and each shall receive his own wage according to his own work" (3:8). The unity is in working under God. These instruments are not rivals, they do not see themselves as rivals, their work is a unified effort under the sovereign God. The diversity is that each are answerable to God, and from God will receive reward for the work each has done. The last part of verse eight is preparatory for the teaching on judgment and probably 4:1-5.

Finally, Paul lays out three simple statements that bring the proper perspective on ministers into focus. "For we are God's co-workers. God's field, God's house you are" (3:9). Paul identifies himself and Apollos as "God's co-workers." The KJV is surely mistaken when it translates this phrase as, "We are laborers together with God." If this were the case, it would certainly undermine Paul's whole point thus far! It would be odd for Paul to strongly affirm: It is God who is everything, we are nothing; we just do what we are told, he

causes the growth; we are tools in his hands; and then turn around and put himself and Apollos in co-operative partnership with God! This is most definitely a genitive of possession, "We are co-workers who belong to God." The co-workers are Paul and Apollos and they belong to God. This is further substantiated by the next two phrases which are also possessive genitives.

This verse is absolutely critical in understanding the next section. Note: Paul and Apollos are the workers. The Corinthian church is the field and the house or building. Certainly the language of "house" and later "temple" has its roots in the Old Testament. The New Testament Church is now the household of God, the Temple of God. This too will have tremendous import in Paul's teaching.

4. The Necessity of Careful Building in Light of the Judgment (3:10-15)

The central focus and concern in this passage is that the Corinthians must be careful about *who* is now building and *what* is being built. "Picking up the theme of each one's being 'rewarded according to his own labor' (v. 8b), he is concerned to warn, in the strongest possible language, those who are currently 'building the church.' . . . Thus the argument continues to be a frontal attack against the division and those primarily responsible for it."³³

"According to the grace which God gave to me as a wise master-builder, I laid a foundation, and another builds on" (10ab). The "grace which was given to me" includes both Paul's call as a believer and his commission as an apostle (cf. Romans 1:5). "Paul combines the thought of God's undeserved sovereign generosity (grace) with the notion of honoring a master-builder with a privileged commission to undertake a special task."³⁴ Paul's experience and skill make him a "wise" (*sophos*) "master-builder" (*architekton*). That is what God called him to do.

Although Paul wants to maintain unity with Apollos, and others, he nevertheless reminds the Corinthians that he was the one who laid the foundation of the church in Corinth,

and he did it with wisdom and authoritative skill. Certainly others build on what Paul had laid, but they had better do it with care! "Let each watch out how he builds on!" This warning is the crux of the passage. Those who are bringing strife and division better watch out! Those who claim to be teaching "true wisdom" among the "mature and spiritual" had better watch out!

The care needed in adding on is seen in the fact that there is only one foundation that can be laid down for any church—which is Jesus Christ (3:11). Another foundation cannot be laid down. "Its christological and Christocentric character is what makes it the solid foundation without which the building would not stand."³⁵ The foundation is clearly explained in 1:18-2:5, it is the gospel of the crucified Messiah! The foundation is further explained in 2:6-16, it is the true wisdom, the mystery of Christ revealed by the Spirit.

"And if anyone builds upon the foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay stubble, the work of each one shall be manifest, for the day shall show, because by fire it shall be revealed. And the work of each shall be tested, as to what kind it is" (3:12-13). Paul acknowledges that there will be other ministers, other workers, who build on the foundation. The quality of their work is described as "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble." Many have attempted to attribute certain aspects of ministerial labor with the materials.³⁶ Doctrine, people, character, etc. have all been posited. In R. L. Dabney's insightful sermon on this passage, he argues that spurious converts, often brought into the church through the "new measures" are "wood, hay and stubble."³⁷ Although there may be many excellent applications from the text, as in Dabney's case, I am persuaded that the point Paul is making is simply the difference between combustible and non-combustible building materials, those which will stand the fire of the Last Day and those which will not.³⁸ Fee is on the mark when he states:

With Paul's own concern in view, and in light of the context of the argument as a whole, one may rightly argue, therefore, that

for Paul the 'gold, silver, and costly stones' represent what is compatible with the foundation, the gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified; what will perish is sophia in all of its human forms.³⁹

Paul then describes the result of the fire of judgment, "If anyone's work, which he has built, remains, he shall receive a wage/reward. If anyone's work shall be burned up, he shall suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved, even likewise as through fire" (3:14-15). The picture is the minister of God before the judgment on the Last Day. His life work, his ministerial labor is brought forth. It passes through the fire of divine judgment. If it is the real thing, that which is compatible with Christ and him crucified, if it really builds the church, then the laborer receives a reward. The reward will be nothing less than praise from God (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Those whose work is consumed will suffer loss. The combustible nature of their labor will be revealed on the last day and the loss will be great. The word for "suffer loss" (*zaymiow*, future passive indicative) is a strong one. It cannot have the sense of "to suffer punishment" as in the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory.⁴⁰ But certainly a sorrowful scene is in view. "So because it is better to be sure now than sorry later, each preacher should take pains to find out whether he is exercising a fireproof ministry."⁴¹

These verses bring up a very important issue, namely the idea of rewards. For many the concept of grace and reward are mutually exclusive. Some have taught that salvation is by faith alone through grace alone, but rewards are a matter of merit and works. Certainly salvation is by grace alone, and the one who suffers loss shall be "saved as through fire", which is similar to the "brand plucked from the burning" (Zechariah 3:2). The relationship of rewards to grace is a delicate one. John Murray wrote, "Justification is the only basis upon which good works can be performed. . . . They are not rewarded because they *earn reward* but they are rewarded only as labor, work or service that is *the fruit of God's grace*, conformed to His will and therefore intrinsically good and well-pleasing to Him."⁴²

Were Paul to see their striving for the prize as calculated to earn God's favor through self-effort, a problem would exist. But this is not the case; the race is to be run in dependence upon Christ who enables the Christian to be victorious (2 Corinthians 12:9-10; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 2:12-13). And the works that are done en route, far from being meritorious, are works of faith (1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:11, RSV), done because the runner is convinced that to trust and obey is the essential condition for the enjoyment of fellowship with God (Philippians 2:12).⁴³

The passage has a special focus, the judgment of those who labor in God's field and build on God's building. It has, as it were, a ministerial emphasis. Yet it serves to instruct the Corinthians that they must be careful, they must exercise caution in who does the building. They must be assiduous in examining the materials used. They must look at their own lives. Are they on the proper foundation? Are they wood, hay and stubble? Or are they gold, silver, and precious stones?

5. A Solemn Warning to Church Wreckers (3:16-17)

This next section sets the seriousness of the whole argument in its strongest terms. There is more than loss of reward at stake, there may be eternal consequences as well. "Do you not know" is used ten times in this epistle and expresses Paul's intensity and that what he is about to say is "axiomatic for the Christian and should not have escaped attention as a cardinal element in the community's thinking."⁴⁴ This is a truth that they cannot afford to be ignorant of.

"You (all) are the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you (all)." The focus here is not on the individual Christian as the temple of God, but rather on the corporate community. Once again we have Old Testament language used to describe the covenant community. This covenant community, held together by faith in Christ, is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. By necessity it is to be a holy temple, a sacred dwelling place. These pseudo-wisdom teachers, these divisive people, these party-spirit people had better step back

and consider what the church is. It is not a playground for their selfish ambition, or a platform for their status-seeking, nor a market for their novel doctrine; it is the very Temple of the almighty God!

That statement of fact leads Paul to make a solemn warning: "If anyone corrupts/destroys the temple of God, God shall destroy that one!" Fee simply says, "One can scarcely circumvent the awful nature of the warning."⁴⁵ Thiselton observes that this is an example of "sentences of holy law."⁴⁶ It follows the pattern of Genesis 9:6, and is a divine promise of the destruction of the destroyer. This is definitely a stronger warning than 3:15. Here eternal destruction is in view. To build with wood, hay and stubble is bad, but there is still salvation. To destroy the church is to be destroyed. "The desecration of the divine sanctuary is a capital offense."⁴⁷

Paul hammers out with repetition why this is such a high crime and damnable offense, "For the temple of God is holy, which is what you (all) are."

This section, 3:16-17, cannot be divorced from 3:10-15. It is a solemn, serious warning to all who would corrupt or destroy Christ's bride. In spite of her many sins, she is still "dear as the apple of his eye and graven on his hand."⁴⁸

DOCTRINAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

1. Doctrinal Implications

On the doctrinal level I would like to interact with the carnal Christian teaching and the Bema Seat and rewards teaching. It seems to me that a contextual and exegetical study of the passage thoroughly discredits the popular carnal Christian teaching. Fee claims, "This paragraph (3:1-4) has had its own history of unfortunate application. . . The implication is often that because these people are believers, yet 'carnal,' it is therefore permissible to be 'carnal Christians.' That, of course, is precisely the wrong application."⁴⁹

Let us remember Chafer's definition of a carnal Christian: First, he is a different kind or class of Christian because he is carnal, acting just like the natural man; second, he is domi-

nated by the flesh and unaffected by the Spirit, in his affections or life objectives; third, there is no observable difference between the carnal Christian and the unregenerate; fourth, the carnal Christian is indifferent to the work of the Spirit.

Let me state it clearly, what Chafer and others have described is not a carnal Christian but one who is not a Christian at all. There is no feasible way to take 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 and construct such a person! Bishop J. C. Ryle said it well, "A regeneration, which a man can have and yet live carelessly in sin or worldliness is a regeneration invented by uninspired theologians, but never mentioned in Scripture. . . . A 'saint', in whom nothing can be seen but worldliness or sin, is a kind of monster not recognized in the Bible."⁵⁰

We must note that Paul is not speaking in terms that even come close to those of Chafer. The fact is that Paul has a specific area of carnality in view, namely jealousy and rivalry. Certainly these are bad sins, and impeded the Corinthians from being able to receive truth as they should, but we must be honest and say that an area of carnality is not the same thing as being a "carnal Christian." Even Paul's "as carnal" (3:1) and "are fleshly" (3:3) reveal that in this area they were acting like unsaved people, but Paul was not creating a class, he was observing characteristics. They did not need a change from carnal to spiritual, they needed some basic Christian maturity in how they related to God's servants and each other. Paul is calling on them to desist in their worldly party-spirit.

Furthermore, in the carnal Christian teaching, it is possible to be in this class and stay that way for the rest of one's miserable Christian existence. This, however, is not an option Paul gives to the Corinthians. Paul says "for you are not yet (*opou*) able" (3:2). "The addressees are simply not yet ready for Paul to address them as 'spiritual' people in the full sense of the term. They will grow."⁵¹

Carnality is not an absolute and universal category. No Christian is absolutely carnal or absolutely spiritual. Every Christian is on a sliding scale, possessing both to greater and lesser degrees. No Christian is universally carnal, with every area of their life under the dominion of sin. Every Christian

struggles with areas of carnality, in greater and lesser degrees. Warfield is worth quoting again:

You may find Christians at every stage of this process (from justification to glorification), for it is a process through which all must pass. but you will find none who will not in God's own good time and way pass through every stage of it. There are not two kinds of Christians, although there are Christians at every conceivable stage of advancement towards the one goal to which all are bound and at which all shall arrive.⁵²

What about the notion of 3:10-15 being a special judgment for believers, in which their works are examined and rewarded? It ought to be clear from the context that there is no hint of any such thing. "Here is another paragraph that has suffered much in the church: from those who would decontextualize it in terms of individualistic popular piety (i.e., how I build my own Christian life on Christ). . . . Paul addresses none of these issues, not even indirectly. . . . The church in Corinth, not the individual Christian, is the building."⁵³

It needs to be noted that Paul is not teaching about the final judgment directly. He does that in other places with clarity. He uses the final judgment by way of instruction, enforcing the fact that the Corinthians had better be cautious about who builds and what they build with. If they are not vigilant, they might be somebody's wood, hay and stubble. All builders will have their work examined. Those who built with combustibles will suffer loss. Those who actually corrupted and destroyed the temple will suffer eternal loss in hell.

What is in view is the final judgment where works are judged. Paul's use of "the day" (3:13) is unmistakable (Acts 17:31; Romans 2:5; 14:10-11; 1 Corinthians 1:8; 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; 5:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:2-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:2, etc). This brings up the difficult truth that there is one last and final judgment, where men's works will be judged. Dispensational theology has departed from historic orthodox Christianity by asserting that there are a number of judgments, and the Great White Throne Judgment is only for

unbelievers. Believers have their own judgment time when they get rewards, but salvation is totally out of the picture. It is interesting to note that in the use of 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 for a Bema Seat and reward passage, verses 16-17 are rarely, if ever, included. It can hardly be doubted that 3:16-17 is an integral part of the section, and since it upsets the proverbial apple cart (bringing eternal destruction into the picture), it is disassociated with the previous section

The universal testimony of Scripture and the echo of church history is that there is a great and final day coming where all will be judged (Psalm 9:7-8; Matthew 12:36; John 5:22; Acts 17:31; Romans 2:5-11; et al.).⁵⁴ This judgment will be according to works. Yes, we are saved by faith, but the testimony of Scripture is that our faith will be examined by our works.

The judgment of God would not be according to truth if the good works of believers were ignored. Good works as the evidences of faith and salvation by grace are therefore the criteria of judgment and to suppose that the principle, "who will render to every man according to his works" (Romans 2:6), has no relevance to the believer would be to exclude good works from the indispensable place which they occupy in the biblical doctrine of salvation.⁵⁵

Let us keep in mind however, that Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:10-17 is focusing not on the world-wide judgment, but only as it pertains to laborers and ministers in the church. The context makes this unmistakable. In light of this focus, Thielton's comments are helpful:

This (i.e., judgment) may, indeed will, include whether the person concerned shares the justified status of those who are in Christ; but it will also disclose the extent to which their work has produced some lasting effect in God's sight. For if justification by grace means the dissolution of all that is self-centered, sinful and unworthy, such things by definition will not "survive." On the other hand, what was offered in the strength of

the Holy Spirit and in the name of Christ will have effects that eternally abide within the very existence and praise of the redeemed community and the life of God at the last day.⁵⁶

2. Practical Implications

Unfortunately, because of the abuses this text has suffered, its impact has been somewhat obscured. Looking at it in its contextual and exegetical shape, however, the implications for ministry and the church are immense. The following are merely suggestive, and certainly deserve much consideration.

(1) Strife, rivalry, and party-spirit can be absolutely destructive to a church. What is needed when these problems arise is a direct, head-on assault, using the cross itself. It is the gospel of Christ that alone can re-direct the hearts of true Christians to the biblical perspective of humility and true wisdom.

(2) The church must not raise her ministers to icon status. All of the duly called and appointed elders and pastors of the church are simply serving God, doing the task that they've been called to do. There are no super-stars or celebrities in Christ's church; the instruments are nothing! It is God in Christ who is all in all.

(3) Those who have been called to serve God in the church must exercise extreme caution regarding the materials that they build with. If they use worldly wisdom (pop-psychology, the latest managerial techniques, marketing ploys, etc), instead of building with the word of the cross, the message of a crucified Messiah, then it will be nothing but wood, hay, and stubble. But when the ministry is faithful to the word of the cross and preaches Christ in the power of the Spirit, then one can have certainty that he is building with gold, silver and precious stones.

(4) This passage gives powerful incentive to be faithful and to labor in light of the last day. If we took this to heart we would be freed from the "success syndrome" and would be motivated by "the faithfulness factor." God will judge the

work, and He will dispense the rewards.

(5) This passage also is a solemn warning. There is the frightening prospect of suffering loss. There is the even more frightening prospect of being destroyed. This should serve as a solemn warning to all ministers who are building on the foundation and all others who would dare bring harm to the holy church of God.

(6) Finally, this passage not only sets forth the dangers of status-seeking, infantile carnality and party-spirit, it also shows forth the beauty and glory of the church of Christ. In fact, it is such beauty and glory that makes the above mentioned sins so heinous. In a day when there is rampant ignorance of ecclesiology and an all-around negativity toward the church, this passage comes through with the message that the church is the dwelling place of God. It is holy and it must be treated and built with care.

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Notes

1. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He that Is Spiritual: A Classic Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprinted, 1967. Originally published, 1918).
2. C. I. Scofield, editor. *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 1213-14.
3. *He that Is Spiritual*, 15.
4. *He that Is Spiritual*, 20-21.
5. *He that Is Spiritual*, 22.
6. Stephen J. Nichols, "Documentation: A Brief Exchange Between Lewis Sperry Chafer and J. Gresham Machen," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 62 (Fall 2000) 281-91.
7. B. B. Warfield, "Review of *He that Is Spiritual*," *Princeton Theological Review*, 17 (1919), 322.
8. Charles Ryrie, *So Great a Salvation* (Wheaton: Victor Books; 1989), 61-62.
9. Chafer, *He that Is Spiritual*, "Careless Christians are not concerned with the Person and work of the Holy Spirit," 103.

10. Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 29-30.
11. *Going for the Gold*, 35-37.
12. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), III:248-249; IV:404-405.
13. *Systematic Theology*, III:248-49.
14. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976, 1978), 1730.
15. Throughout this exegesis, all Bible quotations are the author's own translation, unless otherwise noted.
16. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 49-50.
17. Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 2000), 224.
18. *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 121-22.
19. Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, second edition revised and augmented by Gingrich and Danker, 1979), 386.
20. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*. Translated by J.R. DeWitt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 66.
21. James Hope Moutlon and Wilbert Francis Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament, Volume II Accidence and Word-Formation* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1920), 378.
22. Simon J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 102. See also 104. Thiselton also maintains a nuanced distinction, *sarkinos* = "moved by entirely human drives," *sarkikos* = "moved by self-interest" (289).
23. See *1 Corinthians*, 101, for such an explanation.
24. Fee, 125.
25. Fee, 123.
26. Thiselton, 286, 294.
27. Fee, 129.
28. Thiselton, 299.
29. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, HNTC (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 84.
30. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, HNTC, 85.
31. Thiselton, 302.
32. Fee, 132.
33. Fee, 136.
34. Thiselton, 309.
35. Thiselton,

36. See James E. Rosscup, "A New Look at 1 Corinthians 3:12— 'Gold, Silver, Precious Stones'" *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Volume 1, No. 1, (Spring, 1990), 33-51.
37. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, Volume One (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967. First published, 1891), 551-74.
38. This may well include genuine converts in contrast to spurious converts (Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19).
39. Fee, 140.
40. See Stumpff, *zaymia, zaymiow*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Kittel and Friedrich and translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), II:890.
41. Geoffrey B. Wilson, *1 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 57.
42. John Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, Volume II (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 220-22 (italics mine). See also Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), I:78-79.
43. R. M. Fuller, "Rewards" *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Edited by Gerald Hawthorne and Ralph Martin (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 819.
44. Thiselton, 316.
45. Fee, 148.
46. Thiselton, 317.
47. *1 Corinthians*, 58.
48. Timothy Dwight, "I Love Thy Kingdom Lord."
49. Fee, 128.
50. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Durham: Evangelical Press, reprinted 1979. Originally published, 1879), 17, 19. Ryle is also pointed when he addresses the fallacy of three classes of men, xxiv. - xxv.
51. Thiselton, 286.
52. Review of "He that Is Spiritual," 327.
53. Fee, 136-37.
54. See *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, Chapter 32, "Of the Last Judgment."
55. *Collected Writings of John Murray*, "Romans," I:79.
56. Thiselton, 313-14.