

“It will be Revealed by Fire”

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“Each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work.” (1 Cor 3:13)

Read 1 Cor 3:10-17

I never claim to have the corner on any singular truth. I do, however, desire to examine each verse or passage in its Scriptural surroundings. This is no less true for the paragraph before us. This passage has been used perhaps more than any other to place upon believers a sense of guilt and failure in their service to God. It is carried like a biblical club to keep the people of God busy and in line lest they lose their rewards and stand before God ashamed for their lack of obedience and embarrassed of their failures. The outcome of such thinking is nothing short of bondage. Such thinking shapes one’s view of the doctrines of imputation, substitution, identification, adoption, redemption, propitiation, the human will, and divine sovereignty. None of which are minor or secondary. None of the previous thoughts are really disputed. They can be misunderstood and misappropriated, but we know what they mean and the significance of it.

The church in Corinth had divided over individual leaders, leaders who are only tools used by God. He assures them that only God matters (3:7) and such divisions over people are childish and infantile (3:1-4). In the paragraph before us (1 Cor 3:10-17) the apostle Paul is addressing leaders within the church such as Apollos, Cephas, and himself (1:12). He is not addressing the individual Corinthians. The people of Corinth are the material being used by the master builder in the building of the Church.

In verse 10, Paul sees his ministry as an expression of God’s grace. He sees himself as laying the foundation (Eph 2:20, 21, Rom 15:20) that someone else would build upon. His exhortation is to those who build on the foundation He has poured. He sees himself and those who follow as being of the same kind of worker, but having different functions. Whoever seeks to lay a foundation other than the one that has been laid, labors in vain (v.11).

Verse 12 is perplexing. The foundation is secure and certain, and those who follow, labor to build a structure upon it. Nowhere are we told what the “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw” are. We only know that a day is coming wherein the quality or nature of the building built on that foundation will be revealed through the means of fire. For us to speculate and try to define what these elements are in detail is futile and will lead to nothing but bondage and legalism. Because of the subject matter such things could be the call to biblical unity or even salvation itself.

Again, it is important to keep in mind that Paul is addressing the leadership in the Church, people like Apollos, Cephas, and Paul. The gold, silver . . . hay and straw are the work of their hands. In fact, the people of Corinth are this work. It is not the works of the Corinthians that will be judged, but the Corinthians themselves as they are the building built on the foundation of Christ by those who labored among them as their spiritual leaders. The idea is one of perseverance, not performance.

Verses 14 and 15 tell us that a “Pastor’s” work will be evaluated by God and based on whether or not the work survives will determine whether or not the “Pastor” will receive a reward for that area of service or whether in that area he suffers loss.

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No church leader should fear having no reward, but it is possible for a leader to labor in vain (Gal 2:2, 4:11, 1 Thes 3:5). When the work is evaluated and found to be true, that in itself is the reward (1 Thes 2:19, 20). Consider the same idea in Phil 2:14-16 and 4:1.

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.”

“Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved”.

It is the same idea in 2 Cor 1:13, 14.

“For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end; just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus.”

If one labors all their life and builds a “Church” on a foundation other than the Lord Jesus Christ, then the “Church” will not survive the judgment, but the individual laborer will. Because the “Church” did not make it through the fire, and because the “Church” is the reward, he will not receive a reward.

Verse 16 turns the attention away from the leadership and to the people of Corinth. They are God’s field (3:9), they are God’s building (3:9), and they are God’s temple (3:16). Some within the fellowship were divisive, disgruntled, and disagreeable (1:10, 11, 3:3). As such they were destroying the Church. As such God will destroy them when the judgment comes (3:13-15). They will not survive the “fire.” Why will God destroy them, because they are endeavoring to destroy God’s people and His people are holy.

There are many in leadership who do not embrace the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Church they are building will not survive the judgment. There are many within the church who are divisive, disgruntled, and disagreeable. Paul warns them of a judgment to come. Such displays as these, these works of the flesh, could be an indicator of their lost condition. As always let us receive the Scripture accurately and then embrace its truth. May we never be seen as a fellowship of unregenerate people who are destroying the true work of God in the midst of His people.