We Are Coworkers in God’s Service

1 Corinthians 3:1-23

Key Verse: 3:9 “For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.”

One day while driving my car, one bumper sticker captured my eyes, which was “Obey your thirst!” It was an advertising slogan from a drinking company. These words reminded me of my former life before I was born again. At that time my life motto was ‘obey your instinctive desire!’. I thought that obeying one’s instinctive desire seemed to become genuinely humane. Because of this humanistic idea I made lots of mistakes and suffered much from the result of this idea. If we live according to our instinctive desire or fleshly desire alone, we live a one-dimensional life as other animals do. Like other animals we eat, sleep, mate, and die. But when we live by reasons, ethics, laws, rules, and another moral standard, we live in the two-dimension. But this is not enough for men. When we live with the Spirit, when we live spiritual life, we live in the three-dimension. Those who live in the two-dimension cannot understand those who live in the three-dimension because the spiritual world is superior to the natural or moral world. So, Paul said in 2:14-15, “*The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God..., the person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things..*.” I pray that we all may not live in the one or two, but in the three-dimension world as men with the Spirit. Amen!

When we are born again by accepting Jesus Christ, we do not jump to the three-dimensional level right away. We are like a new-born baby when we are born again. We must grow as a mature man in the image of Christ. Paul called this transitional period, “sanctification.” We need to be sanctified by the truth, which is the word of God. (Jn 17:17) Peter called the word of God “spiritual milk.” He said in 1 Peter 2:2, “*Like newborn babies, crave spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.*” Through diligent Bible study and practice based on its teaching, our inner person can grow little by little into the image of Christ.

In today’s passage Paul mentions the spiritual immaturity and division of the believers in Corinth Church. He called them ‘worldly’ (1), ‘mere infants (1),’ people who are not ready (2),’ and ‘mere humans (3).” Why did Paul rebuke them and call them this way?

First, we are all co-workers in God’s service (1-9) Paul called them these because there was a division in the church. Look at verses 3-4. “***You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans*? *For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings*?**” The Corinth Church was started with Paul during his second missionary journey. Acts 18:1-17 describe this well. While Paul stayed there for one and a half years, Paul taught the message of the cross exclusively. There was great work of the Holy Spirit there. Some synagogue leaders such as Crispus and Sosthenes were converted by Paul’s teaching. After Paul left for Ephesus, Apollos took over Paul’s leadership. Apollos was a learned man, an expert of the Old Testament. Still, he lacked the knowledge of the cross. With the help of Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos became a true disciple of Jesus and leader of the church. (Ac 18:26-28) In Corinth Church there were some believers who missed Paul, thinking that Paul was the real leader of the church. Others had different ideas from them. They followed Apollos, regarding him as a true leader. Still others followed Peter thinking that Peter was the direct disciple of the Lord. People of the church had their own preference about their leaders.

It is not bad for each one to have his or her own preference. God made each person unique and different. Some like spicy chicken and others like regular chicken. My wife likes to mix rice with soup while I eat rice and soup separately. Some liked Paul’s style and his leadership while others liked Apollos’. Each person can have their own preferences. This is a matter of good or bad, not of right or wrong. Spicy chicken will be good for my children but will be bad for me whose stomach is not ready for them. They cannot say that I am wrong if I don’t eat spicy chicken. By the same token I cannot condemn my wife who mixes rice and soup because this is not a matter of right or wrong, but of preference. Each person has the right to choose their own preference. This is not sinning.

In verse 5 Paul rebuked their foolishness. “***What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task***.” Paul said that Apollos and himself are no one, but the servants of the Lord. They were only the servants who worked their own task as Jesus had assigned. They were only servants and Jesus is their real master. Today there are divisions in churches in S Korea because of their differences and preference among the leaders. But they must know that their pastors are only servants, not masters. Jesus is the only master whom they must worship, honor, and follow. Amen!

Look at verses 6-8. “***I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor***.” In these verses Paul compared Apollos and himself as farmers. Paul planted the church and then Apollos took over it and built up the ministry. Paul and Apollos only served the Lord, and it was the Lord Jesus who grew the ministry. Paul and Apollos had one purpose, which was to build up the body of Christ, the church. And they would be rewarded according to their labor, Paul as the apostle (missionary) and Apollos as the pastor. There is no greater or smaller between the two in being rewarded. To the eyes of God both were precious and both works were great. Both works had the one purpose which was for the sake of Christ Jesus.

We have one body with many different parts. Each part has its own function and role. All parts sustain and are held together with one purpose, which is to build up the body. But if a foot complains to the mouth, “Why do you enjoy all kinds of delicious food while I carry the heavy weight of the body?”, it does not make sense to all. Each part has its own unique function to build up the whole body. What Paul mentioned here was the same as this function of the body. In a church there is a pastor, elders, musicians, a secretary, deacons, and all of them work together to build up the body of Christ Jesus. Now look at verse 9. “***For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.***” Amen! We are co-workers in God’s service, which means that we all work together for one purpose as God has assigned according to our gift and talents. In God’s sight no one is superior or inferior, but we are all equal and all co-workers in God’s service. We are God’s field, which means that we can preach the word as a farmer sows the seed in the field. We are God’s building, which means we are parts of God’s building, which is the church.

Second, Christ, the foundation (10-15) Now Paul illustrated himself as a builder. Look at verses 10-11. “***By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ***.” Paul compared himself to a wise builder who laid a foundation for the church. The foundation is Jesus Christ. It does not matter who builds up the house and with which material they use if only the foundation is Jesus Christ. It does not matter which denomination church we go to or work in, if only their preaching is the message of the cross and their teaching is a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.

According to Paul it is important how to build the house and with which material they use. Look at verses 12-14. “***If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames***.” People in St. Louis prefer brick houses over wooden houses with siding because of tornadoes. When a tornado hits, wooden houses are blown away, while brick houses will survive. When a fire occurs, wooden houses are burnt up while brick houses remain exterior. Paul said that fire will test the quality of each person’s work. Here, the fire will be a trial, and it will be the Judgement. Jesus said that he will judge this world with fire on the last day. When the fire hits, if the house survives, the builder will be rewarded. If the house is burned up, the builder will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved. This illustration teaches us two things. First, we must build our houses on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ. Second, we must build our houses with good and solid materials. It is not easy to build brick houses. It takes more time and costs more than wooden houses. But we must choose the right materials and build our houses. This reminds us of what Jesus said about the parable of the narrow and wide gates, and the wise and foolish builders in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 7:13-14, 24-27) Lot in the book of Genesis was a foolish builder. Even though he himself escaped the flame when God judged Sodom and Gomorrah, he lost all he had such as his wife, his two daughters, and all his possessions in the city by the fire.

Third, we are God’s temple (16-23) In these verses Paul again emphasizes the unity of the church. Look at verse 16-17. “***Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.***” In these verses, ‘you’ ‘yourselves’ are plural, and God’s temple is singular. So, the ecclesia is a God’s temple, a church. The church is where we worship God and have fellowship. The Holy Spirit dwells among the ecclesia when we have koinonia. We are God’s temple where the Holy Spirit works mightily. We are all united with Christ and become one in Christ. So, anyone who destroys the church, and the unity of the ecclesia, will be judged. If someone boasts about his or her smartness and attempts to destroy the unity of their church, they will be judged. They deceive themselves because they are not smart or wise in the sight of God. (18-19) God catches their boasting in their craftiness. (19)

This is Paul’s conclusion. Look at verses 21-23. “***So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God***.” Here, the words ‘all are yours’ means that you are free to choose whoever and whatever you want. It is free whoever you choose between Paul and Apollos as your leader. But you must know that Paul and Apollos are the servants of Christ, and you are co-workers, and we all belong to Christ Jesus, our true master and leader. Jesus is our solid rock. We must build our life on this solid rock, Jesus. Let us fix our eyes and thoughts on Jesus, who loved us and endured the cross for our salvation. Let us come to the cross, love the cross, and carry the cross as Jesus said to us. I pray that we may know, we may follow, and we may boast about except Jesus Christ and Him Crucified. May the name of Jesus be highly exalted in you and through your life. Amen!