

How to Build Properly

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[0 : 00] Well, we have two readings this evening. The first is from Acts chapter 18, and if you're following in the Blue Bibles, that's on page 927. Acts chapter 18 describes Paul's evangelistic work in Corinth, and we're going to pick up the story after Paul has left Corinth in verse 24, when Apollos arrives.

Acts 18 verse 24.

Now I'd like you to turn over to 1 Corinthians chapter 3, page 953. We pick up our reading in the middle of a long discussion of the Corinthian focus on which gospel worker is more important, and I'm going to read from the beginning of chapter 3.

Paul here is describing his first visit to Corinth. I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people back then, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it, and even now you're not ready. For you're still of the flesh, for while there's jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

[2 : 22] For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos?

What is Paul? Servants, through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor, for we are God's fellow workers.

You are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it.

Let each one take care how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now, if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each 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.

[3 : 43] If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will reap a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he'll suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he's wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.

For it is written, he catches the wise in their craftiness. And again, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they're futile. So let no one boast in men.

For all things are yours. Whether Paul or Apollos or Kephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future. All are yours.

[4 : 45] And you are Christ's. And Christ is God's. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Sit down and as you do so, let's pray together.

Father, we pray again, Heavenly Father, that you would indeed speak to us, that you would plant your truth. Properly into our lives.

In a way that would issue forth in love. In changed behavior and thoughts. Please deliver us from the lies we often believe.

And help us to receive your truth as it really is. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. What does a good church look like?

What does a good church look like? It's a question I quite often get asked in my job. Can you recommend? I know somebody who's moving somewhere. Can you recommend a good church for them? Well, if you've ever been asked that question, why would you recommend the one you recommend?

[5 : 53] If you're in a church with students, as we are here, they're often moving on to other places. What sort of church should they choose? It's one of the things you teach them on their way out the door.

What sort of church would you recommend? And how might you build one? There are so many ways of measuring churches. Is it a good one? Because it's got lots of people. There's lots happening. Lots of activity. Have they got the Bible open? That's a measure that people sometimes use. Is the music good? Is the coffee good? Are people friendly when you go there? How do you promote health in a church? How do you build it properly? Well, it's very much the concern of this passage that we're in. 1 Corinthians 3.

Please go there if you're not there already. It's the big issue in the first part of this book. We're joining an argument where the Corinthians are squabbling about what kind of Christian leader is the best sort to listen to and to follow.

[6 : 55] It's a feature of their life that the apostle is very much concerned about as he writes. The Corinthians are arguing about Christian leaders.

I want to point you at chapter 3 verse 9. Chapter 3 verse 9 is, I think, very much the central idea in this chapter.

Let me read it. We, and he's talking here about Apollos and Paul, two of the visitors to Corinth. We are God's fellow workers.

You are God's field, God's building. This verse has in it the central ideas in this passage.

The Corinthians have lost sight of two things. They look back on the work that the apostle Paul did in Corinth before he left, before Apollos came, and they don't think much of him.

[7 : 57] Was he really building properly? Was he really doing the work properly? And they look back on the work that he produced before he left, before Apollos came, and they don't think much of what they were like back then either.

Neither the worker nor what he built looked great back then. And from where they stand now, some of them think they'd rather take their lead not from Paul, the one who first brought them the message, but from other Christian workers.

And the one in focus at this point is Apollos. Probably because he was more impressive looking than Paul. You get the feel, don't you, in Acts chapter 18 when you read about him, that he was a dynamic sort of person, proving powerfully that the Christ was Jesus.

All the way through chapters 3 and 4, the discussion focuses in on Paul and Apollos. Look at verse 4, chapter 3, verse 4. One of you says, I follow Paul.

Another, I follow Apollos. Chapter 3, verse 5. What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Flip on to chapter 4, verse 6. I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.

[9 : 34] All the way through this section, he's addressing the Corinthian division of opinion. Who was better, Paul or Apollos? Paul will not allow that kind of division.

And he says, chapter 3, verse 9. Myself and Apollos, both of us are God's fellow workers. Both of us working with God. And you, you are God's building. Yes, even back then, after my work, God was building that.

Now that's what this section is about. God's builders building God's building. And two images are used throughout this argument. They're both images to do with increase.

The first is an agricultural image from farming. The second is a constructional image from temple building. Let's look at the first. What does Paul say about God's builders?

[10 : 35] First big point. True gospel workers are really one under God. Chapter 3, verse 5.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed. As the Lord assigned to each, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. Now there are several steps in this argument. Here's the first. Apollos and Paul, verse 5, are both servants. Now the Corinthians are preoccupied with human leadership. Paul or Apollos. Which is better? Paul brings God into the equation.

[11 : 44] Paul and Apollos, just servants. Both of them. Notice how he puts himself and Apollos on the same level here. And that is a surprising thing to do.

For in many ways, they're not on the same level. Paul is the apostle. And he's much more experienced than Apollos is in terms of ministry.

In fact, that could be part of the reason the Corinthians like Apollos better. Paul seems to have deliberately avoided impressing the Corinthians with the things that would naturally impress them. Apollos being inexperienced may not have been so careful. But in this context, says Paul, both of us, servants.

Same level. Servants through whom you believed. And that needs to be said. For in all their debate about which one is better here, the Corinthians have lost sight of the Lord that they believed in.

[12 : 49] I came to know the Lord in February 1980 through hearing Billy Graham preach, the famous American preacher. He came to do an evangelistic week at university when I was a student.

And I went along and I believed what he said. Annie, my wife, was converted in the school changing room through hearing the gospel from a friend of hers, Becky Hubbard.

If I was to say to her. I'm a more spiritual sort of Christian than you are because I was converted through hearing a famous preacher preach. And you were converted just through a school friend.

Would that not be the stupidest thing to say? Billy Graham, Becky Hubbard. Paul would say.

Servants through whom you believed.

Same Lord, same message, same effects. Anyone who's preoccupied with which messenger they believe the message through has simply lost the plot.

[13 : 51] And that is exactly what the Corinthians have done. Preoccupied with which level they're on because of which messenger brought them the message.

They've lost sight of the Lord they believed in. Apollos and Paul, servants, both of them through whom you believed. That's the first step in the argument. Second step in the argument. Verse five.

Apollos and Paul have different God given tasks. As the Lord assigned to each. I planted.

Apollos watered. Different jobs planting and watering. Both God given jobs. As the Lord assigned to each. The picture here is a farming picture.

Question. How do you get stuff to eat? Well, the modern answer is go to Aldi. But somewhere back in the supply chain, somebody put seed in the ground one day and it grew.

[14 : 54] We had in our garden an absolutely outstanding crop of vegetable things this year. How did that happen? Well, because someone, not I, I hasten to add, planted those things.

Someone's got to do that, you see. If no one puts seed in the ground, there'll be nothing to eat next year. And that's not the only thing that needs to happen. Somebody needs to water the seed.

Now, a little bit of cultural adjustment is necessary here. I know that for you who've only gardened in Glasgow, it may be a foreign concept. But let me assure you, everywhere else in the world, you need to add water.

Incidentally, to those of you who are good at killing indoor plants, that's the problem. It does not work the same way indoors as it does outdoors.

You need to add water. If you don't plant, no vegetables. If you don't water, no vegetables. Which is more important, planting or watering?

[15 : 56] Dumb question. On their own, neither is any use in producing vegetables. And I think that's precisely the point that Paul is making in verse 5. Servants, as the Lord assigned to each.

Different tasks. One came first, the other followed it up. Neither one of them less essential in Paul's mind in making the Corinthians what they are. The Corinthians needed to hear that because they're preoccupied with human activity.

Who did the more important work for us, Paul or Apollos? Who really mattered? Well, says Paul, we both got our work from God. God clearly thought both jobs mattered or he wouldn't have sent two people.

So how stupid to play them off against one another. Apollos and Paul, different God-given tasks. And most importantly, third step, God and only God made things grow.

Verse 6. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. Now, Paul is not saying that he didn't do any work or Apollos didn't do any work.

[17 : 14] It wasn't important. No, it was real work. They were given it to do and they did it. In verse 8, it's referred to as labor. And that's a hard work word.

Yes, we did work hard, but it was God that produced the results. Back in Corinth, they've got strong opinions about whose work was more powerful.

Apollos' work or Paul's work. And they're particularly unhappy, I think, with Paul and the way he did things. For the first part of Paul's time with them, he was self-financing.

And he supported himself in his tent-making business. And it's a dirty common job, tent-making. And they really don't like that. And they don't think that's the thing a spiritual sort of messenger ought to have been doing.

In terms of style, I'm pretty sure that Apollos pushed their buttons more than Paul did. Paul says, what a dumb preoccupation.

[18 : 16] Can't you see that it's not the style of the workers that matters? Because only God produces real spiritual growth. Yes, he uses human beings to do it.

But it's him that does it. Let me illustrate again with the farming image. You plant. You water. There is one thing you absolutely must not forget if you want vegetables next year.

That growth comes not from planting or from watering. It comes from seeds. And seeds are fundamentally unpromising looking things.

Imagine if you'd never seen a seed before. Finding one on the road and picking it up. What would you think it was? A stone or a bit of dead wood or something. Somebody comes past and says, put that in the ground and you'll have cabbages next year.

You think, he must be joking. Cabbages from that. But the truth is that despite appearances to the contrary, seeds are magnificently growy things.

[19 : 26] Yes, you have to push them into the ground. And yes, you have to water them. But it's the seed that grows. And it doesn't matter how elegantly you prod things into the ground.

Or how diligently you water the things you've prodded into the ground. If it's not seeds you're pushing into the ground and watering, absolutely nothing will happen.

It is just like that with the gospel message. It is fundamentally unpromising looking. Jesus Christ, God became man, died for your sins and rose from the dead.

So that you can escape judgment and have eternal life. Imagine expecting anything to come from somebody hearing that message.

It's really unpromising looking. A crucified savior. Life from the dead. Life from the dead. But that message has all the growing power of God behind it.

[20 : 35] Verse 7. Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything. But only God who gives the growth. God and only God makes things grow.

Final step. Paul and Apollos are under one God. And you belong to God and not them.

Verse 8. He who plants and he who waters are one. And each will receive his wages according to his labor.

True builders, he says, are under one God and they are one with one another. You can't rank them against one another and be thinking rightly.

Comparing one with another. What a genuinely foolish thing to do if you've benefited from both their work. Let me illustrate. Think about our new building here. Think how lovely and light and bright the entrance hall is downstairs.

[21 : 37] I've wandered through the entrance hall several times this last week. And it's always full of people. Apprentices eating their lunch and the like. Why is it full of people? Because it's so lovely and light and bright.

And everybody likes being there. If I were to ask which is more important in the new entrance hall downstairs, the light bulbs or the electricity, what would you say?

Well, you could make a case either way, I suppose. The physics graduates might say, oh, the electricity. Without electricity, you wouldn't even have the concepts on which to build a light bulb. The more aesthetically minded among us might say, oh, the light bulbs, they're so much more lovely than electricity. The truth is that in terms of lighting the room, electricity and light bulb are one.

Separate them, nothing happens. And they function as they do because they are married together beautifully under the design of the architect of the building.

[22 : 39] Thanks, Kenny. Because of his excellent plan, they do something inseparably. How silly you Corinthians are to be ranking in spiritual value those whom God has used to give you what he's given you.

And how silly to be saying, I'm for him. No, I'm for him. No, you're not for them. They're only servants from God for you.

True gospel workers are under one God. Now, this divided way of thinking among the Corinthians is deeply embedded in this letter.

They do it not just with their leaders. They do it with one another as well. Who is more important here? When we get to chapter 12, we find Paul using the illustration of body parts.

How ridiculous, he says, would it be if a foot should say, well, because I'm not a hand, I'm not really part of the body. Or if an ear should say, because I'm not an eye, I'm not part of the body.

[23 : 42] Or if an eye should say to a hand, I don't need you because you're not an eye. When we think that sort of way, either towards our leaders or towards one another, that one is more valuable or that we are less valuable, we demonstrate that we have lost perspective on reality.

When all we can do is rank ourselves against other people and one against another, we demonstrate that our perspective is flawed.

God's builders. God-given servants of one God with different tasks, which God uses as he sees fit. True builders are under one God.

And God's people belong to God and not to the builders. That's the first big point. Second big point. True gospel workers always follow the same pattern. Now, I'm going to read from verse 10. And as I read, ask yourself, what is the key word here? According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation and someone else is building on it.

[25 : 04] Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now, if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each 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. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.

If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss. Though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. What's the key word? The key word is foundation.

We've changed image here.

We're no longer in the field. We're on the building site. And the image here, I think, is of temple building. Gold, silver, precious stones. There's a building in the Bible which is full of gold and silver, precious stones.

[26 : 12] And it's Solomon's temple back in the Old Testament. And in verse 16, Paul calls the Corinthians God's temple. We're talking about temple building language here. And the bit of the temple building that Paul wants the Corinthians to think about is the foundation of it.

He wants them to consider, first of all, not what they look like now or think they look like now, but the foundation they were built on back then.

And he says, verse 10, when I came a building in Corinth, I did a really excellent job. Like a skilled master builder, I laid the right foundation.

Because I laid the only foundation on which anything really spiritual can be built, namely Jesus Christ. He says exactly the same thing back in chapter 2.

Look back to chapter 2, would you? Chapter 2, verse 2. When I came to you, I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

[27 : 21] That's the foundation you were built on. I taught you about him. I exemplified what it was like to live under him. You were built with expert skill.

Now back to 3.10. Now here comes a master stroke in the argument. The Corinthians are thinking, whose work is better?

Paul's or Apollos'? Paul has just said, silly question. We're one. And having done that, he very cleverly turns their mind in a different direction.

I laid a brilliant foundation, verse 10. And someone else is building upon it. How is the building going now?

He asks. What he's doing here is redirecting their attention to what's going on at the moment in Corinth. Someone else is building.

[28 : 26] No names are given. But that other person or influence is present right the way through the rest of this chapter. Verse 10. Let each one take care how he builds.

Verse 11. No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Not all building follows the Jesus Christ foundation.

Verse 12. Not all building is the same. Some of it's done with precious stuff. Some of it's done with junk. Verse 13.

Each 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.

Paul says it might look okay now to the untrained eye. But on the last day when the Lord Jesus returns, then it will be clear who's been building properly here.

[29 : 32] Will it survive the test? Will it stand or will it burn down? Verse 14. Some people's work will be seen to be good work. Verse 15. Some people's work will be seen to be rubbish work.

Just note verse 14 and 15. This is not a statement about judgment in general. It's a statement about God's assessment in the future of Christian gospel work.

That's what he's talking about here. More alarming still. Verse 17. Some people's work will turn out to have been not building work at all, but demolition work.

And that will be a fearful thing for the person who's been doing it. Now, of course, all the way through this letter, the Corinthians demolish one another.

It's evident in lots of this letter. They're not building up, but tearing down. What Paul is trying to do here in this second half of the chapter is begin to make them suspicious of some of what's going on in Corinth now.

[30 : 44] The first house we bought was in East London. We looked for ages for a house. The wedding date was getting closer.

We had nowhere to live. It became more and more desperate. Eventually, we found a really, really nice looking house. It just looked lovely. It had a lot of work done to it.

It was beautifully decorated. It was one of those houses that when you walk in, you just feel calm because it's been so beautifully organized. We wanted it just like mad.

But it was in East London and there'd been lots of bomb damage in that area. And so it needed surveying. The surveyor's report was devastating. The key sentences, as far as I remember, though, I haven't got them in print anymore, were these.

It is unclear how the rear wall is attached to the rest of the property. And this one also made its mark.

[31 : 46] In our opinion, this property has been developed as a speculative venture, which is polite surveyor talk for something much ruder. The truth is, it looked great to the untrained eye.

But bring the expert in and everything is revealed. There's loads of Christian ministry that looks great.

But when the temple building expert returns, then it will be clear who's been building properly. Paul wants the Corinthians to begin to become critical of what's happening now where they are.

Stop arguing about who did the right stuff back at the beginning. Both of them were doing the right stuff. No, the problem is now. Verse 18.

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he's wise in this age, let him become a fool, let him become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.

[32 : 53] For it's written, he catches the wise in their craftiness. And again, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile. So let no one boast in men, for all things are yours.

Verse 18. Some Christian workers in Corinth think themselves top-notch builders now. But need urgently to adopt a different foolish-looking way of doing things.

Namely, Christ and him crucified. It looks foolish, but that's where the growth comes from. Why does that need to be done? Because, verse 19, as the scripture says, God catches the wise in their craftiness.

Verse 21. Some people's minds are full of human personalities and human gifts and human activity. Which group they belong to. Which movement they're part of.

Which preachers they like to listen to. Who they've been most influenced by. Who they've been chatting to. What conferences they've been invited to speak at. Paul says, verse 19, that stuff is

folly.

[34 : 03] God is not fooled by any of that. And verse 20. You may be able to pull the wool over the eyes of other Christians. But not of God. He knows.

He knows what kind of work has been done in Corinth and who's doing it. He knows the thoughts of the wise. That they are futile.

He knows where precious stuff is happening. And who's doing it. He knows whose work is rubbish, even if no one else can see it. Don't be deceived, Paul says.

The Corinthians have in mind which of their previous visitors is better. Paul's concern is for who's building right now. And are they building according to the pattern?

The foundation. It was a great foundation. Jesus Christ and him crucified. But now are they building the right way? He suspects not. And he suspects that because the Corinthians have their eyes on people and which one is better.

[35 : 12] Those symptoms give the game away. Let no one boast in men, he says, verse 21. Don't do it. For. All things are yours.

Don't find your value in human associations. Now you belong to Jesus. You have. Everything. At your disposal.

I think that's what verse 22 is about. Whether Paul. Or Apollos. Or Kephas. Or the world. Or life. Or death. Or the present. Or the future. All.

Are yours. And you are Christ's. And Christ is God's. Now you belong to Jesus. You belong to him. And in him. To God himself.

And all of God's true servants. Are at your disposal. Paul. Apollos. Kephas. They're your servants. And there's no part of existence.

[36 : 13] Life or death. Present or future. Which is outside of belonging to Jesus Christ. If you've got him. You've got everything. You've got everything. Well. We've got to the end of our passage.

And to the end of our time. Let me summarize. True gospel workers. Though they might look different. Are one under God. And true gospel workers.

Always build. In line. With the foundation of Christ crucified. What church would you choose.

Well you might ask. Do they preach the Bible. And that's a good test. But it's not the best test. The best test is. Is the crucified Jesus.

The center of. What they teach. And how they teach it. And how they do what they do. And that's something you can't assess. In just one visit.

[37 : 18] Is a church. All driven by personality. Is a church. An unholy scramble. Behind the scenes. To get into the in crowd.

Do the leaders in the church. Want me to trust them. Or trust Jesus. Do they want to possess me. For themselves. Or do they want me. To be possessed by him.

Do they want me. To come to their church. Or do we. Do they want me. To know their Lord. Those are crucial questions. And quite different. From one another. Do they want me. To sing his praise.

Or to sing their praises. Those questions. Take a while to answer. But they are really. Worth asking. I have a friend. Who leads a big church.

In a big city. It's a huge ministry. And because of that. People are always. Wanting to come to his church. And see what he does. Can I come and see what you do.

[38 : 16] To which he responds. Every time. No. There's nothing to learn here. We preach the Bible. And say our prayers. He could so easily.

Want to be the center of attention. Yeah. Come and see what we do. Come and look at how good we are. But he wants to keep the Lord Jesus Christ. At the center of people's attention.

So it's no. There's nothing to learn here. We preach the Bible. And we say our prayers. And that takes us on to the area of Christian responsibility.

How do we do what we do in church? Well let me say. It doesn't matter what position you have in church. Whether you're the pastor. A home group leader. Sunday school teacher. Musician.

On the coffee rotor. Your model. If you're going to build properly. Is Jesus Christ. The crucified one. What's more important.

[39 : 21] Your service. Or his service. The work that you do. Or the work that he's done. Your status in church.

Or his status. Over his people. Your home group. Or his home group. Your coffee rotor. Or his coffee rotor. Your music group. Or his music group. Who does it belong to here?

Is it his. Or yours. The people you have responsibility for. It's a good thing to exercise responsibility for people. But whose people are they?

Is this your group? Or his group? Are they your people? Or his people? Do you want them to love you? And follow you? Or do you want them to love him?

And follow him? Those are quite different things. If you want them to love you. And follow you. Then you will subtly be pulling them away.

[40 : 21] From loving him. And following him. It's so easy to want people to love you. And at one level we all do. We like to be liked. But it's self-promoting.

And it is not. It is not the shape of the foundation. Which is Christ crucified. An un-self-promoting model.

Jesus Christ and him crucified. Paul says to the Corinthians. I built excellently on that foundation. And of course that's precisely why some of them don't think much of him.

Because he wasn't promoting himself. But that's because they don't think much of Christ either.

Let's pray together. I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

like a skilled master builder I laid that foundation let each one take care how he builds upon it let's just have a moment to respond to God in the quiet before we pray together let's just have a moment we thank you gracious God for those who spoke the gospel message to us mostly unspectacular people who were not promoting themselves we praise you for this

[42 : 48] Christ-centeredness cross-centeredness and we pray that you would help us to rejoice in the Savior who's given himself for us and we pray that you'd help us to follow after his pattern of doing things deliver us we pray from being deep at heart help us to build well in the responsibilities that you've given us individually and as a church pray that we might resolve to know nothing about apart from Christ Jesus and him crucified and that that would be powerfully effective in the lives of many other people and indeed of ourselves for we ask it in Jesus name Amen we pray for Ontario that we pray that we book thank you as to all the people who are O enfoies who are the Moyniac and that you don't know what the window or are the first people toyk toom what Prawa is