

## **The risk of carnal Christians... destruction of the church**

When a Christian fails to continue in his process of sanctification, he invites a carnal phase to his walk as a Christian. Yet rarely are the consequences of this phase confined to only the backsliding Christian. The consequences are often far reaching especially when other irresponsible Christians or non-Believers commune together. Paul identifies this potential problem in the church of Corinth (1 Cor 3:6-17).

1. Study 1 Corinthians 3:6-17. What do you see in 1 Corinthians 3:6-8? What is the context of the verses? What does it mean?

In the preceding verses, Paul has associated the behavior of envy, strife and division among the Corinthian Christians as carnal; sinful behavior that is motivated by selfish attitudes, worldly morals and the result of Christians who are not growing spiritually.

Why do Christians divide themselves by taking pride in certain Christian leaders or claim loyalty to their teachings? While Paul “planted” and started the church in Corinth, and Apollos “watered” and ministered to the church after it was established, it was God who really worked and grew the church by drawing non-Believers to Himself. Paul and Apollos knew they were merely servants through whom He worked.

Because God determines the results or outcome of one’s efforts, Christians are only responsible for their efforts and quality of work.

2. Study 1 Corinthians 3:9-15. What is Paul referring to? What is Paul building?

Paul and Apollos are “God’s fellow workers” who tended to and nurtured “God’s field”, a metaphor for Christians and collectively as “God’s building” the church.

Paul laid the foundation of the church on sound doctrine, which was the correct gospel and view of Jesus Christ.

Apollos built upon that by teaching, training and enabling others in the process of sanctification.

Using the metaphor of constructing a building to that of building up the church, Paul draws a subtle contrast to the existence of envy, strife and division. Growth is in part the result of how Christians (leaders as well as members) participate in the life of the church. However, this work is serious and done carefully as Paul warns, “But each man must be careful how he builds on it”; each Christian is accountable to God for their contribution.

A Christian’s contribution to the church may be high quality as symbolized by “gold, silver” or “precious stones”. This would be lasting and enduring.

If the foundation is understood to be “Jesus Christ”, then examples of valuable materials used to build the church and supported by that foundation could be the teaching of sound doctrine and theology, prayer and fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

A Christian’s contribution to the church may be low quality as symbolized by “wood, hay” or “straw”. This would be temporal, of little benefit and subject to decay.

The Corinthians may have been growing the church for other reasons such as around the person of Paul, Apollos, Corinthian cultural practices or worldly wisdom.

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Regardless of the work, there will be a “day” (verse 13) when Jesus Christ will judge the works of Believers (2 Cor 5:10). While it is not entirely clear of how Christ will judge, the Bible uses the imagery of “fire” in reference to the evaluation of the Christian’s work. This imagery is more readily apparent in Revelation 2:18-19; 3:18; 22:12.

Paul indicates that a Christian whose work meets approval after Jesus Christ’s judgment is credited, while the worker of inferior materials is saved, he is not rewarded for his labor. Furthermore, Paul figuratively implies that just as a worker knows about the quality of his building material, so does a Christian knows what work that God approves of.

3. In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, what is Paul referring to when he speaks of a “temple?” Is he referring to the Christian’s life (hint: study the Greek verb endings and personal pronouns that Paul uses in verse 16)? What does he mean “if any man destroys the temple”?

Greek verbs have distinct endings that show whether the subject of the verb is singular or plural, first person (I, we), second person (you, you all), or third person (he, she, it or they). For pronouns, there are different Greek terms for singular “you” or the plural “you all”.

The Greek verb endings and pronouns of 1 Corinthians 3:16 all indicate the plural.

Do you not know that you (plural) are a temple (singular) of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

There are two different Greek terms for temple, which have two different meanings.

“Hieros” refers to a sacred building such as a temple building.

“Naos” refers to the sanctuary of the temple consisting of the Holy place and the Holy of Holies. This is the term that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 3:16 to describe the local church.

When considering the grammatical nuances and context, Paul is not thinking of individual Christians as temples or dwellings of the Holy Spirit. Instead, he is thinking in the plural, the local church where God resides.

The clause “Do you not know” occurs 10 times in this letter and each time it precedes an indisputable statement, which in this case is: “you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you.”

In his confrontation of the Corinthian sin of coveting, division and strife, Paul takes the time to explain to the Corinthians what to do; yet, warns them of the danger of their behavior which could lead to the destruction of the church. Christians ought to be taking part in the process of sanctification and building the church up instead of taking part in sinful behavior and taking the church down.

This ultimate warning is directed towards the person who destroys the church: God will destroy him. That would certainly stop someone from sinning further.

### References:

1. Kaiser Jr. WC, Davids PH, Bruce FF, and Brauch MT, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press (1996).

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