

1 Corinthians 3:1-17 (Edward B. Dennett) 56974

The House of God Traced Through the Scriptures, Church, as Built by Man, The (3:1-17)

This scripture demands the most careful consideration, as it occupies an important place in respect of the truth of the Church of God. As is so often the case in the epistles, the Holy Spirit uses the condition of the saints as the occasion for the unfolding of a new aspect of the Church. The Corinthian saints were carnal (σαρκῖνοι), and on this account the apostle could not minister the truth he would have desired, but was compelled, because of their state, to speak to them as “babes in Christ,” to feed them with milk, and not with meat, and so on. (1 Cor. 3:1-2). The evidence of their “carnality” was the formation of schools of opinion in the assembly, the existence of “divisions,” the saints ranging themselves around their self-chosen and favorite teachers; some choosing Paul, some Peter, some Apollos, and some even venturing to use the name of Christ to refuse the servants whom He had sent. The apostle seizes the opportunity to develop the true position, both of the servants and of the saints, and of both alike in relation to the Lord. “Who then,” he exclaims, “is Paul; and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye have believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.” It was intolerable to Paul—a heart-rending sorrow, we might say, that the name of a servant, however eminent, should come between the Lord and His people. For what were the laborers? God’s workmen—laboring in unison and fellowship, but all belonging to God. And what were the saints? “Ye,” says the apostle, “are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9). The servants were God’s workmen, the saints were God’s building—God in His grace was thus everything, servants and saints alike owed everything to Him. All things were of Him, and He alone must therefore be magnified, whether by saints or servants.

Proceeding now further, the apostle shows what the responsibility of God’s workmen is in the work entrusted to their care. He says, “According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master-builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:10-11). Two things will at once strike the reader in contrast with what has been considered in a former paper. First, the apostle speaks of himself as laying the foundation, and also of himself and others as building upon it. This is a very different thing from that contained in the Lord’s words to Peter, “Upon this rock I will build my Church.” And it is this difference which explains the two aspects of the house of God. The work of Christ in building His Church must of necessity be perfect. Himself in His death and resurrection, the Son of the living God (declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead), the foundation, every stone He lays upon it, like Peter himself, must be a living stone. But, as this scripture in 1 Corinthians teaches, He also entrusts the work of building to His servants, and holds them responsible for the character of their work. Paul can thus say, “I have laid the foundation”—as he was the first to proclaim the gospel in Corinth, and thus was the means of forming the assembly of God in that city. (See Acts 18) He had laid the foundation as a wise master-builder, and he warns others as to the manner in which they might build upon it, reminding them in this way of their responsibility to the Lord for the character of their work.

And looking more closely into the details of this scripture, we find that there are, or may be, three classes of builders, and that the testing of their work will take place at a future day. The apostle says, “If any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it (the day) shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. (Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?) If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are” (1 Cor. 3:12-17). There are then, as has often been observed, the good workman, and his work good, and who receives a reward; the workman who is himself saved, but whose work is bad and is therefore burnt up, and who consequently suffers loss; and lastly there is the bad workman and his bad work, and both alike are destroyed.

What is meant by the “works” or “building” is manifest from the context. It is putting wood, hay, or stubble on the foundation, instead of gold, silver, or precious stones; that is, bringing souls into the assembly of God who are without divine life. This may be done in two ways; by the proclamation of false doctrines—doctrines which are subversive of the truths of Christianity, setting aside, for example, the necessity of the new-birth, or the need of cleansing by the precious blood of Christ, so that natural men, men not having the Spirit of God, are introduced into the Church as the result of such teaching; or it may be done by openly and avowedly bringing into the assembly those who are not saved through faith in the Lord Jesus, including in the Church of God other than those who have the title to be within. A third case is possible; namely, the workman being deceived as to the true character of those he may introduce. In one or in all of these ways the workman may fail in responsibility to Christ as to the character of his building. He may seemingly, outwardly to the eyes of men, be a most prosperous and successful builder, while he may in reality be but piling up upon the foundation wood, hay, or stubble, for future and certain destruction. Surely all should perceive what a solemn thing it is to be engaged in building in connection with the Church of God, and at the same time learn that the character of the work done is of far more importance than its extent. Even as in the parable of the talents, fidelity and not success is that which elicits the commendation of the Lord, so here it is the nature, not the quantity, of the work which will meet with reward.

Having pointed out the different characters of building, the next thing to be observed is, that the revelation of the character of the work is left to a future day—in fact to “the day,” a term, we apprehend, which signifies the appearing of the Lord. Whatever the sort of building His servants may carry on in the meantime, all abides until the fire—the fire, as usual, being a symbol of the holiness of God as applied in judgment—tries every man’s work of what sort it is. We may think or judge that certain builders are doing their work badly; but who are we to judge another man’s servants? To their own Master they stand or fall. Besides the fact that we are not the judges, we cannot detect the true nature of any work. We may test the methods employed by the Word of God, but as to the work itself there is One only who has the necessary discernment, the infallible knowledge, and the unerring standard to obviate all possibility of mistake; and He is the One whom John

saw in the Revelation, who was “clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and His eyes were as a flame of fire; and His feet were like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and His voice as the sound of many waters. And He had in His right hand seven stars: and out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength” (Rev. 1). To “the day” therefore which will be revealed by fire every man’s work must be left, to be pronounced upon after the perfect standard of fire has been applied to it by the Lord Himself. Knowing this, in the very next chapter Paul tells the Corinthians that it was a very small thing that he should be judged of them, or of man’s day, and he reminds them that he could not even give a true judgment about himself, that the Lord is the Judge, and hence nothing could be truly estimated until the Lord should come, “who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts,” and so on. (1 Cor. 4).

In connection with the truth that all the work of the Lord’s servants will be left for judgment until He comes, there is another important principle to be remembered. It is that the Lord in the meanwhile bears with the work of His servants. We do not mean that He approves of it, only that as the time of judgment has not yet arrived He allows the work to remain, and does not pronounce upon its character. Thus if souls are brought wrongly into the house of God, He deals with them according to their profession, and holds them responsible for the ground they are on. The epistles everywhere bear out this statement. Take for example 1 Corinthians 10. Paul reminds the saints “how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (1 Cor. 10:1-5). Now what object had the apostle in citing these facts of Israel’s history? It was to apply the teaching they afforded to the Church of God in Corinth, and to all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours. (1 Cor. 1:2). He expressly says that these things happened to Israel as types—types for believers in all ages; and hence he warns the saints of their danger—the danger of lusting after evil things, of tempting Christ, of murmuring, and so forth. The “ifs” of the epistles, as they are called, teach the same lesson. We thus read in Colossians 1: “And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled...if ye continue in the faith.” This is not that the reconciliation is dependent upon our persevering in the faith; but rather that if we continue in the faith we are shown (not to God, who knows the secrets of all hearts) to be real believers, and if genuine believers, and not merely professors, we are reconciled. These and other passages of the same kind abundantly prove that God accepts all according to the ground they take. If brought upon the ground of Christianity, professedly associated with Christ in His death, they are spoken to as Christians, they have come under the responsibility to walk as such, and they are warned of the consequences of sin, of departing from the living God, as the children of Israel did in the wilderness. (See Heb. 3; Heb. 4) God does not say to them, “You are only professors, deceiving yourselves and others;” but He meets them where they are, supplies them in His word with tests by which such may easily discover the truth of their condition, warns them of the obligations they have incurred by being numbered amongst His people; but exposure and judgment, He defers until “the day.” Not that He does not in His government judge them now. He does, for judgment begins at the house of God, but public judgment before all is left until the Lord’s appearing.

Another proof of the above principle is found in the Lord’s attitude, during His life, towards the temple at Jerusalem. The Jews had profaned it in many ways—made it a house of merchandise (John 2) and a den of thieves (Matt. 21), but He still called it His Father’s house; and He continued to recognize it as such, until, finally judging it, He said, “Your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Matt. 23:38-39). And immediately we read that “Jesus went out, and departed from the temple.” Until that moment, spite of the abuses and corruptions that had grown up around it, He had borne with His people, and regarded the temple as His Father’s house; but now, having judged it and them, the house was desolated by His own departure from it. In the same way—whatever the unfaithfulness of His servants, and however indeed they may corrupt the temple of God—He waits in His long-suffering and grace before He pronounces judgment upon it; and, as also in the case of the Jewish temple, He still treats it as God’s house on the earth.

We conclude therefore, on the ground of this scriptural teaching, that the house of God includes, in this wider aspect, all who have been brought upon the ground of Christianity, not only the living stones, as in 1 Peter 2, but also all whom the Lord’s servants, in their individual responsibility as builders, have introduced, whether believers or only professors. With the Word of God in our hands, we may be tempted to refuse the work of this and that servant, deeming it worthless; but all must remember, we again add, that we are not the judges, that the Lord in His own time will make manifest every man’s work of what sort it is, and that in the meanwhile we must not refuse what the Lord has not rejected; that is, we must likewise acknowledge this aspect of the house of God on earth. Salvation is not secured, as this scripture shows, by being in the house of God. Wood, hay, and stubble are there equally with gold, silver, and precious stones. And moreover it must never be forgotten that the fire will test every part of it. It is therefore a solemn thing—solemn both in the view of present responsibility and of future judgment—to be within. It is also a precious privilege to be within the sphere of the abode and action of the Holy Spirit; but this very privilege neglected and slighted becomes the ground of judgment in a future day. Christendom—for Christendom—for all practical purposes expresses the extent of the house of God—will on this very account be the scene of unparalleled judgments. The measure of light is the measure of responsibility, and the history of Babylon in the Apocalypse reveals the character of the awful judgments that will descend upon a Christless church, on that which still claims to be the church, but from which the Holy Spirit has long departed, and which Christ has long since spued out of His mouth.

The judgment spoken of here, however, is more especially that of the builders. The one whose work abides receives a reward. Called and qualified by grace for His service, and indeed sustained in it by divine power and grace, the same grace rewards him for his faithful labor.□ He whose work shall fail to stand the test of the holy fire, and is consumed as wood, hay, or stubble, is himself saved, yet so as through (διὰ) fire, but he suffers loss. He had been led astray, though a real believer—led astray by human thoughts and reasonings, and, laboring after man’s methods, he had lost sight of the true character of the house of God, and thus all his service was in vain, and is not only counted as worthless, but draws down upon itself the consuming fire of judgment. The servant therefore suffers loss; he not only receives no reward, but he has also to see that all the energies of his professed life of labor for the Lord have been misdirected and in utter opposition to his Lord’s mind. The third case is sadder still; it is that of an evil servant who corrupts the temple of God. He had taken the place of a builder, and he had labored, it may be earnestly, according to his own thoughts; but by his preaching he had corrupted Christianity, denying its fundamental doctrines, and adapting it to the tastes of the natural man. Himself unconverted, he might yet have been a wise teacher, a man of progress and intellectuality, one who had shaken off the traditions and superstitions of past ages (as men speak), and known how to harmonize the

teachings of the Bible with the speculations of science and philosophy; a man consequently of a broad and catholic spirit, who would look upon all men, in such a land as this, as Christians, denying the distinction between the saved and the unsaved, bringing all alike within the pale of the Church. But the time of judgment has at length come, when his work is examined, not by the light of reason and man's ideas, but in that of the fire of the holiness of God; and what is the result? Not only are the wood, hay, and stubble consumed which such a workman had put upon the foundation of, the house of God, but he himself is also destroyed (φθειρω) because he had corrupted (φθειρω) God's temple. What a warning for the teachers of Christendom, as indeed for all who take the place of service in connection with the Church of God. May all such lay it to heart, and seek, in anticipation of the time when every man's work shall be made manifest, to form a true estimate of their service in the light of God's presence, and of His Word.

Two observations have yet to be made; the first as caution, and the second as guidance. The fundamental error of popery, as indeed of high-churchism and sacerdotalism, if not inherent in the principle of all State churches, lies in the attribution to the house of God as man's building of that which belongs only to the Church which Christ Himself builds. The Church which Christ builds is indestructible; the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Not so popery (or the church as builded by man anywhere); but "her plagues shall come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her" (Rev. 18:8). It is therefore always necessary, when speaking of the Church of God, and what is said of it in His Word (if we would be preserved from error, or misconception as to its privileges and claims) to carefully distinguish between the two aspects which are given in the Scriptures. Secondly, we find in 2 Timothy all needful direction for our path and conduct in the midst of all the corruptions which man has brought into the house of God. "Nevertheless," says Paul, "the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ" (Lord, is the correct reading) "depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor, and some to dishonor. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, prepared unto every good work. Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:19-22). Man may put bad materials on the foundation, but he cannot disturb the foundation itself, he may confound the distinction between the saved and the unsaved, but the Lord is not deceived, He knows them that are His; and the responsibility that lies upon every one who names the name of the Lord, while waiting for the day which will manifest everything, is to depart from iniquity. Then the apostle reminds us that through the activity of teachers of evil doctrines (see verses 16,18, and so on). the Church, in its outward presentation to the world, has become like to a great house which contains vessels both good and bad. The Lord's servants are to purge themselves from the vessels of dishonor if they would be qualified for the Master's approval and service. Moreover, they are to flee youthful lusts. In other words, they must be separate both from ecclesiastical and moral evil; and they must be found in the practice of every Christian grace and virtue, together with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Such is the path for the saint amid the abounding and increasing corruption of this evil day. May the Lord give more and more of His beloved people wisdom to discern it, and strength to walk in it to the praise of His holy name.

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