

A9 BIBLE STUDY: I CORINTHIANS #3

Scripture of Lesson: I Corinthians 3: 1~22

Upon drawing the attention of the reader to Christ crucified and God's wisdom, now Paul addresses one of the issues of the Corinthian Church, division among brethren.

1. Ministry of God --how it works: v. 1~9

In the case of the Corinthian church the division occurred due to the human tendency to identify with a leader or teacher of a group. Some believers had received the gospel through Paul while others did through Apollos and some had come from Jerusalem having heard the gospel from Peter. These people, instead of being united in Christ Jesus, tended to make groups within the church based on what evangelist had brought them into God's family. Here, Paul is rectifying this error by laying down the principle of God's servanthood. Throughout the history recorded in the Bible, God calls men and women into His work, empowers them with His message and special help to speak the message and to lead His people. This has been true with Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, Samuel, Isaiah, Ezekiel and many others.

Jesus called common men into His ministry to work with Him and to learn from Him to prepare them for the post-ascension evangelical mission. These disciples saw that God's special help goes with them as they go forth trusting in the guidance. How else could they have gone on so courageously in the face of much hardship, opposition and persecution? In v. 6 Paul explains clearly the principle of God's ministry:

I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. [v. 2: 6]

Someone needs to plant seeds and someone else needs to water and nurture the seed's germination and growth. But it is God who gives growth. Farmers are acutely aware of this fact. That is why when they bring in a harvest, they do not apportion credits to the one who did sowing and another who did fertilizing. All these works are necessary but it is God who gave the growth to enable them to bring in a bounteous harvest.

Throughout the history of Christianity much division occurred because those in the ministry of God tended to give credit to men rather than to God. Catholics give preeminence to Peter; Lutherans to Martin Luther; Presbyterians to John Calvin, Methodists to John Wesley, Seventh Day Adventist to Ellen White, etc. Just as Paul admonished the Corinthian Christians, Lord Jesus would not be pleased with the state of His Church if He comes back today. That is why He had asked His disciples as follows:

I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth? [Luke 18: 8]

Discussion topic: What did Jesus mean by 'really find faith on the earth?' What faith? What is your assessment of true faith that Christ is intent on finding when He returns?

2. Building on the foundation of Christ: v. 10-17

Any work that is worth in eternity's sense must be based on the foundation of Jesus Christ only. Paul emphasized that no one can lay down an eternally true foundation but that of Jesus Christ only [v. 11]. This point is often forgotten when denominations establish their own doctrine, which has been devised through some human cunning reason and rationale, but has departed from the true doctrine of the crucified Christ.

Upon accepting the gospel of Christ and confessing Him as one's Savior, a person is justified and receives salvation by grace of God. However, the Scripture often encourages Christians do good works and some

denominations claim that salvation is never ours unless we have accumulated a certain amount of good works in our life time. Paul has made clear that our salvation is given solely by the grace of God through our faith in Christ in Romans 3: 24, 28; Romans 11: 6; Ephesians 2: 8-9. What we build upon the foundation of Christ, however, must go through the test of fire of the truth on the Day of Judgment for the saints [v. 13]. Any good works that do not withstand this test will be consumed by the fire and there won't be any reward [v. 14]. However, to those who were faithful in the mission from the Lord as a humble, faithful servant, the Lord will reward bounteously:

His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord. [Matt 25: 21]

To some people, the Lord will answer like the following:

Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. [Matt 7: 21-23]

What is the key difference between these two groups, where one receives a compliment and a reward while the other group receives a harsh criticism and rejection from the Lord's presence? Seemingly the second group did many wonderful good works and yet their works do not stand the test of fire on the Judgment Day. Likely their works were not for the glory of God but for their own glory, their own achievement and for filling their organizational greed of expansion in power and money. It is amazing that the Lord would say to them, "I never knew you." Yet they were preaching, prophesying, exorcisms and many wonderful works. Christian churches need to repent and return to the true life of Christ as the Lord exhorted the Church at Sardis in Revelation Chapter 3:

And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. [Rev 3: 1-3]

Even in this spiritually dead church of Sardis there was a few, handful of souls who were regarded as worthy souls by the Lord:

Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. [Rev. 3:4]

So, even if the majority of believers in your church is in the wrong, do not be discouraged but shine your true light of Christ to remain 'undefiled.' And you will receive eternal rewards from the Lord on the day of accounting.

One principle to remember as we build our spiritual house is that we are building a temple of God in our life, a dwelling place for His Spirit where He delights to come to have fellowship with us, where His precepts are meditated and applied, where heart-felt sacrifices are offered and where sincere, contrite prayers are offered as sweet smelling incense to the Lord God. How could a Christian think of defiling the temple of God? Likewise, we need to keep our body, life and family holy and sanctified before God [v. 17].

Discussion topic: How can our body, life and home be a temple of God? What can we do to make it fit as temple of God?

3. Avoid human wisdom: v. 18-23

Why did Paul say, "Let no man deceive himself?" in v. 18. A Christian with the mind of Christ is bound to appear foolish to this world. Therefore, if a Christian wants to look wise to this world, he has to deceive himself and take

upon the cloak of worldly wisdom and thereby present himself as 'savvy' and 'be cool to the crowd.' A number of Christian pastors want to be popular in this world, gathering populist crowds, selling popular books, building a large group of followers in social networks, etc. Can you imagine Jesus doing this kind of popularity games with the crowds today? The Lord knows their thoughts to be vain [v. 20]. Human thoughts are foolishness to God.

He lets the 'smart' people of this world to fall into their own traps. Let us look back to what traps we, the human society, has fallen into during the past two centuries -- great and small wars that killed hundreds of millions of people, genocides, global terrorism, fearful diseases like AIDS and cancers, nuclear weapons and the fear of self-destruction, arms race, environmental pollutions and global warming. Are these not self-made traps by human design and 'wisdom'?

Discussion topics:

- 1. How can we avoid these self-made traps?*
- 2. What is godly wisdom applicable today if we were to depart from 'human wisdom?'*