

The Trinity & The Church

by John Stott

This sermon delves into 1 Corinthians chapter 3, focusing on the Trinity and the Church. The Apostle Paul addresses the Corinthian Christian community's divisions, attributing them to a flawed understanding of the church. He emphasizes that true wisdom is found in humility and boasting only in the Lord, not in human leaders. The church is depicted as God's field, building, and temple, highlighting God's role in growth, Christ as the foundation, and the Holy Spirit's indwelling. The importance of developing a biblical view of the church and its leadership is emphasized, with a call to humility and service.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:3, 1 Corinthians 3:11, 1 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 3:21, 1 Corinthians 1:31

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Humility in Leadership"

Description

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Transcript

Well, good morning everybody. We come today to our fourth Corinthian study. Our text is chapter 3, as we've been reminded, and the title, the topic is the Trinity and the Church.

The outline you'll find in your convention program on page 33. So, at the beginning of this chapter, the Apostle reverts to the divisions, what he calls the schismata, of the Corinthian Christian community. And as he does so, he attributes these divisions not only to sins like jealousy and quarreling, but rather to their fundamentally defective understanding of the church.

His thesis can be simply stated. If they had a true view of the church, they would have a true view of church leaders. Indeed, if they had a higher view of the church, they would have a lower view of the leadership, a more modest view, and there would be no boasting about men, which is the climax to which he comes in verse 21.

First Corinthians chapter 3 is, in fact, one of the greatest New Testament chapters on the church. We, evangelical people, are often justly criticized for being rugged individualists and for having a poor doctrine

of the church. But insofar as we do have a poor doctrine of the church, we have departed from the New Testament.

The New Testament has a high view of the Christian community as a community unlike any other community throughout the world and throughout history. So may God give us this morning a balanced view, a modest view, a biblical view and understanding of the church. Well, the collecting link between chapter 2 and chapter 3 is obvious.

Chapter 2, verse 14, Paul had insisted that spiritual truths can be determined or discerned only by spiritual people, and now he tells the Corinthians quite bluntly that they did not qualify as spiritual people. They were unspiritual. Verse 1, brothers, I could not address you as spiritual people, pneumatikoi, but rather as worldly people.

That's the New International version, but I think it's an unfortunate translation because Paul's reference is not to the world, cosmos, but to the flesh, sarks. And the flesh is, of course, our fallen, self-centered, self-indulgent nature. And in calling them fleshly or carnal, sarkinoi or sarkicoi, both words are used in different texts, he's not suggesting that they're unconverted.

He doesn't call them natural, psychicoi. The word he used in chapter 2, verse 14, for those who don't possess the Holy Spirit, no, they have the Spirit, all right. Besides he addresses them as brothers, or sisters and brothers, so they're Christians, all right.

But on the other hand, they're not truly spiritual Christians, governed and controlled by the Holy Spirit. So the apostle uses the third term, sarkinoi or sarkicoi, and he develops here the same antithesis with which we're familiar in Romans 8 and Galatians 5 between those who live according to the Spirit and those who live according to the flesh, their self-centered, self-indulgent fallen human nature. Now next, Paul has a second way of saying the same thing at the end of verse 1. He describes the Christians not only as carnal or fleshly, but as mere babies in Christ.

They've been regenerated by the Spirit, but they're still infants, napioi, in Christ. They've not yet become telioi, mature, the word he used in chapter 2, verse 6. Now I fear, oh, by the way, Don Carson has a rather nice phrase. He says that they were wretchedly, unacceptably spiritually mature.

That is, I think, their position. Now I fear that Paul would say the same thing to many Christian congregations throughout the world today. Now you and I rejoice in the statistics of church growth that we have been given this week and that are fed to us in many ways.

We rejoice the Christian community is growing wonderfully, rapidly, in many, not in all parts of the world, but in many parts of the world. But what we don't always remember is that it's often growth without depth. There is superficiality everywhere in the Christian community today, immaturity and superficiality.

Well, on what grounds does the Apostle Paul make this evaluation of the Corinthian Christians? On what grounds does he lodge his complaint that they're immature and babyish and carnal? Carnal, not spiritual, immature, and not mature. Do you mind if I have a little sip of water? Because I have a little frog in my throat while I drink it. Do you know the story of the pastor who always drank a glass of milk before he preached? Well, he was always there on the pulpit, you know, and every time before he preached he drank this glass of milk.

So a couple of young wags in the congregation determined that they'd play a practical joke on their pastor. So when nobody was looking, they poured half of the milk away and filled it up with gin. And they wondered very much what would happen.

So he picked up the glass as usual and took a sip and licked his lips and took a second one. And he quaffed it all and was heard to mutter, gosh, what a cow. Now where was I? I was asking the question, by what criteria did the apostle conclude that the Corinthians were carnal, not spiritual, that they were babies and not mature? Answer, you can tell a child and its age in two main ways.

The first is by its diet and the second is by its behavior. First its diet, verse 2, I gave you milk and not solid food because you were not yet ready for it and indeed you're not even ready for it now. So just as babies begin with milk that is easily digestible and only gradually go on to solid food, so Paul had been obliged to feed the Corinthians with spiritual milk, that is to say the rudiments of the faith because they were not yet ready for meat, the meat of the word of God.

So that in spite of their knowledge, do you remember from chapter 1 they had been endowed with knowledge and they had been enriched with many spiritual gifts, in spite of that they were still at an elementary stage in their Christian life. As C.K. Barrett writes in his commentary, that was a hard saying for the Corinthians, but the Corinthians were very pleased with themselves, very complacent as we shall see again tomorrow, but the apostle says, your babies, you haven't yet grown up. So what is the difference between meat and milk? It Paul is certainly not saying that the cross is rudimentary teaching which Christians later grow out of, heaven forbid we never graduate from the school called Calvary.

So, C.H. Hodge writes, the difference between milk and strong meat is simply the difference between the more or less perfect development of the things that are taught, or maybe I could put it as Gordon Fee does similarly, the argument implies that for Paul the gospel of the crucified one is both milk and solid food. As milk it is the elementary good news of salvation, as solid food it is understanding that the entire Christian life is predicated on the same reality of the cross. I think it's important for us to understand that we don't grow out of the cross, we grow deeper into the cross and the fullness of its implications.

So the continuing need for milk is the first evidence that the Corinthians were babies in Christ, or reverting to an earlier phrase, were carnal rather than spiritual. Then the second criterion by which Christian maturity can be evaluated is behavior. Verse 3, since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly or literally are you not fleshly, carnal? The answer is of course yes, because both jealousy and quarreling are found among the works of the flesh in Galatians 5. That is the works of our lower, fallen, self-centered, self-indulgent nature.

Quarreling and jealousy are the works of the flesh. So, the second criterion by which Christian maturity is, or immaturity is judged is behavior. I hope we're clear about that.

Then Paul adds, if you are quarreling and are jealous of one another, are you not mere men? That is to say, you are behaving cata-anthropon, according to a human being. You're following human instead of divine standards. Verse 4, for when one says, I follow Paul and I follow Apollos, are you not mere human beings, merely human rather than godly in your outlook? Now I wonder then if you've ever noticed this three-fold indictment by the Apostle Paul of the Corinthian Christians.

Their behavior was one, carnal and not spiritual. They were controlled by their selfish nature instead of the Holy Spirit. Second, it was babyish and not mature.

They were suffering from what Freud would have called infantile regression, going back to their babyhood. They'd never grown up. And thirdly, they were human and not divine.

Their mindset was not godly but ungodly. Well, those are three very serious allegations of the Corinthian community. Carnal not spiritual, babyish not mature, human and not divine.

And the evidence for their carnality, immaturity, and ungodliness was partly their doctrinal diet, still learning the ABC, and partly their moral failures, their jealousy and their quarreling. Well, I hope that all of us are really concerned that the church will grow into maturity, our church. Because I think there are many church leaders here and clergy and leaders of different kinds, I venture to digress a moment and ask you whether you are very familiar with Colossians 1, 28, 29.

I myself believe that those two verses are one of the greatest mottos for any minister or pastor or church leader to have. This is what the Apostle writes. We proclaim Christ, warning everybody and teaching everybody in all wisdom in order that we may present everybody mature in Christ.

That was Paul's ambition. Now we think of him as a missionary and as a church planter, as an evangelist. But he thinks of himself not just concerned with the planting of the church, but that it will grow into maturity in Christ.

And his desire is that everybody should do so. This is not out of anybody's reach. We proclaim Christ, warning everybody, teaching everybody in all wisdom that we may present everybody mature in Christ.

What a motto to have. What an ambition and a goal to have for the congregation that God has called us to serve. Well, all that is something of an introduction.

And now the Apostle delves deeper. He argues that the Corinthians have a defective understanding of the church, or they would not behave as they were doing. And he develops three pictures of the church that you see on your outline, all of which have important implications.

The first is an agricultural metaphor, the middle of verse 9, you are God's field. You, the Corinthian church, the local church, you are God's field. The second is an architectural metaphor, the end of verse 9, you are God's building.

And the third I call an ecclesiastical or religious metaphor, verse 16 we jump to, you are God's temple, which is of course a religious building. So we're going to work through these three. One, you are God's field.

And the implications are drawn out in verses 5 to the beginning of verse 9. Paul begins by asking two indignant questions, verse 5, what after all is Apollos and what is Paul? He doesn't even refer to these two leaders, himself and Apollos, in polite language. He doesn't even say, who do you think we are? He deliberately uses the neuter, what do you think we are that you should pay such an exaggerated deference to us? And as Bishop J.B. Lightfoot comments, the neuter is much more emphatic than the masculine, it expresses greater disdain. So he is, you see, debunking himself, demoting himself and Apollos.

So what are we? Well, verse 5, second part of verse 5, we're only servants through whom you came to believe. In other words, we're not masters to whom the Corinthians owed their allegiance, we're servants, only servants, that is all. Moreover, they're servants through whom you came to believe, not servants in

whom you believe, we're not the objects of your faith, and not servants from whom you believe, we're not the authors of your faith, we're only instruments through whom God has been at work in order to elicit your faith.

And further, second part of verse 5, this came about as the Lord, that's Jesus, has assigned to each his task. Now, there we got those three things. All three parts of verse 5 are designed to debunk the leaders whom the Corinthians were improperly elevating.

One, the leaders were only things, neuter, only instruments of divine activity, excuse me. Secondly, only servants, agents through whom God was at work. And thirdly, only doing the job which God had assigned to them to do.

So neither the Corinthians nor their leaders had anything to boast about. And in verses 6 to 8, the apostle identifies the different tasks in the church, illustrating them from his agricultural metaphor, that you are God's field, and applying them to himself and Apollos. And there are three main tasks to be done.

If a field is ever to produce a harvest, I'm sure some of you are farmers or you're gardeners, and you know this very well, it's very obvious, everybody knows this. And the three tasks to be done if a field or garden is to produce a harvest are first planting the seed, second watering the seed, and thirdly causing the seed to sprout, sowing, irrigation, and growth. So how does Paul apply this to the Corinthian experience? Answer, he applies it historically, chronologically.

Verse 6, I planted the seed, he said, I was the first to come to Corinth. He came during his second missionary journey, round about AD 50, he planted the seed, he planted the church. Then after him came Apollos, and Apollos watered the seed that the apostle Paul had planted.

And then he moved on, and then these two men did their pioneer tasks in relation to the seed, but God made it grow. So the tenses of the verbs in the Greek sentence enforce this in verse 6. I planted is an heireiss, Paul came to Corinth, did his job, moved on. Then came Apollos and watered the seed, and that the watered is another heireiss.

He did what he had to do, watering the seed, and then he too moved on, but God made it grow. And that is an imperfect tense, so that all the time when Paul was sowing, when Apollos was watering, all the time God was giving the growth, causing the seed to sprout. So Paul's and Apollos' ministries would not have been of any great value if God had not caused them to grow, given growth to the seed.

And now Paul compares with each other the three actors involved, that is Paul, Apollos, and God. And in the evangelization of Corinth and the establishment of the church there, verse 7, neither the planter nor the waterer is anything, because both the planting and the watering are unskilled and somewhat mechanical jobs. Anybody can do them, it doesn't require any professional expertise, you don't have to go to an agricultural college to learn that, a PhD in this is no use to you.

Anybody can do these things, drop seeds into the soil and get a watering can and water it, it's elementary. No what really counts, what really matters is neither the planting nor the watering, but rather the causing of the seed to sprout and to bear fruit. No human being can do it, Paul couldn't do it, with all his apostolic authority Apollos couldn't do it, with all his knowledge of the scriptures and his famous eloquence, only God makes things grow.

Now Paul adds a further point, which demonstrates the stupidity of the Corinthians' behavior. So far he has insisted that the planters and the waterers count for nothing in themselves, so it's silly to exalt their ministries. Now verse 8 at the beginning, both the planters and the waterers have one purpose, their different tasks, planting and watering, serve the same goal, namely to secure a good harvest, so it's silly to put them in competition with one another, they're both aiming at the same end.

Further, second part of verse 8, each will be rewarded according to his labor, and God will do this on the judgment day, so it's silly of the Corinthians to anticipate the day of judgment by promoting different personalities now. And the conclusion, verse 9, is we are God's fellow workers and you are God's field. We need to think about that last phrase a little bit more carefully.

We are God's fellow workers. Since the aim of the whole passage is to downplay the role exercised by human leaders, it seems very unlikely that it means we are the privileged workers with God, that is, he's working there, we're working there, and we are doing it together. It's much more likely that it means we are fellow workers, that is, Paul and Apollos, in the service of God.

He's not, I think, wanting here to speak of the privilege of working with God. Anyway, the Revised English Bible translates it, we are fellow workers in God's service. Well, what can we learn from all this? This first agricultural metaphor, what is the message that we are to take away with us and never to forget? Well, surely the metaphor of the field, the planting, the watering, the giving of the increase does not teach everything about the Christian ministry.

It's always dangerous to push an analogy beyond the point at which the metaphor is being made or the analogy is being drawn. It's very dangerous to argue from an analogy that because the church is a field, therefore everything about fields has a parallel in the church. No, no, we have to ask, at what point is the analogy being made? I mean, this says nothing about spiritual gifts.

It says nothing about gifts in distinction to roles and offices. It says nothing about the honor that is attached to being an evangelist or a missionary or a pastor. Other passages of the New Testament teach those things.

This one doesn't. The only thing this is intended to teach is that we human workers have very little importance in comparison with God who gives the growth. That's the point, highlighting one main point that we shall never forget.

God allocates the tasks, God gives the growth, God rewards the laborers, so we must not give glory to ourselves as leaders or to our fellow workers, but to God the Lord alone. And dear sisters and brothers, the church would be a much happier place and a much more harmonious community if we remember this elementary principle. We don't matter in comparison to him.

You are God's field. Okay, we move on secondly. You are God's building.

Verse 9, the second part of verse 9 to verse 16. As Paul moves on from the agricultural to the architectural metaphor. And yet, although they're different, both illustrate what it means to be God's fellow workers, to be collaborators in the service of God.

Whether we're cultivating a field or whether we are erecting a building, we are a team. A team of farmers, a team of builders. We're not laboring on our own.

We're serving a common enterprise and we're pursuing a common goal. Just as in God's field one plants and another waters, so in God's building one lays the foundation and another erects the superstructure upon it. However, the two metaphors don't make precisely the same point.

The emphasis in God's field is that only God gives the growth and the emphasis in God's building is that only Christ is the foundation. Indeed, Christ crucified. So once again the apostle Paul applies the metaphor to himself, to Apollos, to other church leaders in Corinth.

Verse 10, by the grace that God has given to me. Phrase that comes five times in his letters and always refers to his commissioning as an apostle of Jesus Christ. By the grace that God has given to me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder.

The word expert is *sophos*, meaning wise. I'm a wise builder. Perhaps he's again saying the true wisdom is Christ, even though he seems to be folly to some people.

Certainly Paul has been given the pioneering task of preaching Christ crucified. And he goes on that somebody else is building on the foundation that I laid. There is no mention of Apollos by name here because several teachers have followed Paul, both good teachers and bad teachers, both true teachers and false teachers.

So his main point is to sound a warning. A warning that all of us who are Christian teachers need to heed. It's a warning both about the foundation we lay and about the superstructure we erect upon it.

Each one should be careful how he builds. And what carefulness does the apostle have in mind? Well think first about the foundation. Builders, having laid the foundation, should not tamper with it.

They should not try to dig it up or relay it. Because verse 11, there is only one foundation and nobody can lay any other foundation except the one that is already lying there, which is Jesus Christ. This is the foundation that Paul laid.

Verse 10, the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. Indeed, the only authentic Jesus Christ there is, not some false Christ, but the Christ of the apostolic witness, Christ crucified and also of course risen and reigning. Now C.K. Barrett, if I may quote him again, writes, Paul doesn't mean that it would be impossible to construct a community on a different foundation, but only that such a community would not be the church.

The church only exists when it is built upon the one foundation of Jesus Christ. We move on to the superstructure. Builders must be very careful about the materials that they use in the erection of the superstructure.

Broadly speaking, there are only two possibilities. Either gold, silver, and costless stones, probably meaning not jewels, but a stone like marble, gold, silver, and marble, which are valuable and durable, and they represent the true teaching, which will stand the test of time and of the judgment day. Or the alternative is cheap and perishable materials like wood, hay, and straw, representing false teaching or the wisdom of the world.

Now in both cases, verse 13, the quality of the materials used by the builders, that is by the teachers, will be shown for what it is, because the day of judgment will bring it to light. It will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test the quality of every teacher's instruction. And what will be the result of this trial by fire?

Answer, just as there are two possible materials, so there are two possible consequences.

Either, verse 14, the builder's work will survive, because it has been made of durable material, gold, silver, marble, and the builder will receive his reward, or verse 15, his work will be consumed, because it is made of combustible materials, wood, hay, and straw, in which case he will suffer loss. His teaching will not survive, it will be seen to be valueless, and he will lose his reward. But he himself, in the mercy of God, will be saved, although only as one escaping through the flames, or as we might say, by the skin of his teeth.

But he will not lose his own salvation, even if what he has taught will all be burnt up as valueless. Now I think we need just to say in passing that there is no allusion here to purgatory. The fire that he is talking about is not a purgatorial fire, because the reference in this passage is to teachers in particular, and not to all believers, who Roman Catholics believe will have to pass through purgatory.

But the purpose of the fire is not to purify, here, as in purgatory, but to test teaching and pass judgment on it. Now, having looked at that, I want to invite you to reflect with me for a few moments on the solemnity of this teaching. There is a solemn warning here to all Christian teachers.

The Christian teaching ministry is very important. It's designed to build up the church into maturity, and we must be sure that our teaching is authentically Christian. If what we teach is true, biblical, balanced, we will be adding gold, silver, and marble to the foundation, and it will last.

But if what we teach is unbiblical, the wisdom of the world, then we are adding a ramshackle superstructure which will not survive of wood and hay and stubble. Thus, what we teach may either bless the church or harm it. It may last only for time, or it may last for eternity.

So let us be careful, if we're Christian teachers. May God enable us to be all the more conscientious in what we teach. You are God's field, you are God's building, and thirdly, you are God's temple, or literally, God's sanctuary, the holy of holies.

Now, this is an extension of the architectural metaphor because, of course, a temple is a building, but it is a special kind of building, and the apostle develops it differently because he's thinking of the holy of holies. That's why I called it an ecclesiastical, or if you like, a religious metaphor. He begins verse 16, but don't you know, don't you know that you are the temple of God? Paul asked that question, don't you know, ten times in 1 Corinthians.

He obviously thinks that Christian knowledge is very important. Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? Don't you know that you belong to Christ? Don't you know that the local church is God's sanctuary? Don't you know this? His implication is if you did know it, you would behave differently. Knowledge is in many ways the secret of sanctification.

We need to know these things and to take them in and to understand them and to act upon them, and then our behavior will be different. So Paul attributes the Corinthians' failures to their ignorance or their forgetfulness of some truth. In the Old Testament, the essence of the temple and of the holy of holies in Jerusalem, as of the tabernacle before it, was, as we know, that it was the dwelling place of God.

Exodus 25 verse 8, I will dwell among them. And God promised that the shekinah glory, the symbol of his presence, would inhabit and would illumine the holy of holies. And the major promise about the rebuilt temple, the last verse of Ezekiel, is the name of the city will be, the Lord is there, dwelling in the midst of his people.

It's very clear in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, God's temple or dwelling place is not a building but a people. Now it is the individual Christian's body.

Don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? Now it is the local church, as here in verse 16. And now, indirectly, Ephesians 2 verse 22, in Christ you are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit. So the individual Christian, the local community, the universal community, are all said to be the temple in which God dwells.

And in his sanctuary today, the church, there is neither an image, as there was in pagan temples, nor a symbol like the Shekinah glory, but the Holy Spirit of God himself in person. So the sacred wonder of the church is this, that it is the dwelling place of God by his spirit. Of course, as I've said, the church means people and not buildings.

And God's presence is not tied to buildings. God's presence is tied to his covenant people, his redeemed people, whom he has promised never, never, never to forsake. So wherever they are, he is also.

As in this tent, or when we leave the tent, we do not leave him and he does not leave us. He is with his people always. Especially in our worship, when we gather together, two or three, 200 or 300, 2,000 or 3,000, there he is, through Christ, by the Holy Spirit, in the very midst of his people.

It's wonderful. Where they are, there he is also. Now because of the sacred nature of the Christian community as the dwelling place of God, it must not in any way be dishonored, either divided by jealousy and by quarreling, or deceived by false teaching, or defiled by immoral conduct.

Now these things, the dividing, the deceiving, and the defiling, these are acts of sacrilege. They effectively destroy the Christian community as the temple of God. That's why Paul goes on to say in verse 17, if anybody destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

Perhaps the most severe saying in the whole of this letter. And surely the one who destroys the temple cannot be a believer. It must be probably a nominal Christian.

The perpetrator is not a true believer. And he will be destroyed, and I fear that must mean hell, because hell is often referred to as destruction in the New Testament. So, friends, we need to keep reminding ourselves that the church is the temple of God.

In our local church, you're thinking of it now, aren't you? It may be full of unpleasant people you don't like, uneducated people, unclean, unattractive, and this and that. We need to remind ourselves, when we see these people we find unattractive. We need to whisper under our breath, you are the temple of the living God.

God, through Christ, by his Spirit, dwells within you. And how we should love those who are the temple of God. Well, we're coming towards an end.

We haven't got there yet, but we are beginning to conclude. Let's look back at the territory we've covered so far. Here is Paul's three-fold portrait of the church.

You've noticed, haven't you, that it is a Trinitarian portrait. It highlights the role of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in relation to the church. And because it exalts God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it downplays the role of human beings.

What matters most about the church as God's field is that God himself causes the growth. What matters most about the church as God's building is that Jesus Christ is its only foundation. And what matters most about the church as God's temple is that it's the dwelling place of the Spirit.

And this is the apostle's vision of the church. It owes its existence and its growth to God the Father. It's built on the foundation of God the Son.

And it's indwelt by God the Holy Spirit. It is a unique Trinitarian community. And there is no other community in the world which even remotely resembles it.

In 9 verses 18 to 23, the apostle wraps up his godly perspective on the church. He does so by a further reference to wisdom and folly, because the wisdom of God includes this new community that he has been writing about. So if the Corinthians belittle God's church by exalting human beings, they are showing their folly and not their wisdom.

Verse 18, don't deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, according to the prevailing wisdom of this age, he should be willing to become a fool in the eyes of the world, so that he may become wise, truly wise, that is. Verse 19, for the wisdom of the world is foolishness in the sight of God.

And Paul goes on to quote two verses in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, one from the Psalms and the other from Job, both of which express God's rejection of worldly wisdom. So what is needed? The Corinthians need to repent of their boastful, self-centered human wisdom. They need to develop a new humility.

Summed up in verse 21 at the beginning, no more boasting about men. That is the climax of the chapter. And although there are many details of our study this morning that we are bound to forget, I beseech you, my sister and brother, remember this.

Take away with you 1 Corinthians 3, 21a. No more boasting about human beings. I hope we won't forget it.

Because, I've just lost my place for a moment, here we are. Paul goes on to finalize his argument. Instead of taking pride in their leaders and claiming to belong to their leaders, the exact opposite was the case.

Second part of verse 21. All things are yours. Paul is yours, Apollos is yours, Peter is yours.

In other words, far from the Corinthians belonging to their leaders, saying, I belong to Paul. Their leaders belong to them. Don't say, I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos.

Because Paul and Apollos and Peter are yours. You are not theirs. More than that, not only are their leaders theirs, but all things are theirs.

Including the world, life, death, the present, the future. It's all yours. An incredible statement.

And the reason it's ours is that we belong to Christ, and it belongs to Christ. He is the heir of all things, and we are in him, so we are fellow heirs with Christ. And everything that he will inherit, we will inherit.

All things are ours. What a marvelous phrase that is. So this question of who belongs to whom in the Christian community is still vital today.

You know, when I was ordained as a deacon in the Church of England more than 50 years ago, in those days we were taught when you write to your bishop, you begin, my lord, or my lord bishop, and you end, I am your lordship's obedient servant. I gave it up, I think, after the first few, because I reckoned if anybody was anybody's obedient servant, he was mine, and I was not his. But I want to bring it to all of us now and say that I doubt if pastors are wise, if they ever use the possessive adjective in relation to the church.

I doubt if it's wise for us to refer to my church, my congregation, my people, because they don't belong to us. We shouldn't use that possessive, I think. Nor do we have any proprietary rights over them.

It would be entirely biblical for them to refer to us as their minister, their pastor. But we should not refer to them as our people. When we speak of them, it would be much more modest to say, well, they are the people that God has called me to serve.

And I am their servant, and they are not mine. So I conclude, we urgently need to develop a healthy biblical understanding of the church. But only then will we have a healthy understanding of the leadership of the church.

We must not define the church in terms of its leaders. We must rather define the leaders in relation to the church. We must renounce secular views of the church, as if it were a merely human institution like any other corporate body, with human leaders, wielding human authority, who are lionized celebrities.

All that must go. And in its place, we need to develop a godly view of the church. A unique community, unlike any other community, the covenant people of God, the redeemed people of God, in which ministers give humble service, and there is no boasting about human beings.

For all boasting is directed to God, the Holy Trinity. To God, the Father, who alone gives growth to the seed. To God, the Son, who alone is the foundation of the church.

And to God, the Holy Spirit, who alone indwells and sanctifies the community. So verse 21, no more boasting in men. Chapter 1, verse 31, let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.

Let's pray. No more boasting about men. No more boasting about human beings, or human leaders.

Let him who boasts, boast only in the Lord. We spend a moment in silent reflection on those two great statements. We need to humble ourselves and confess our pride, and ask that God will give us this modest, humble understanding of the church, and of its leadership.

Let's pray. Now, a concluding prayer. Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we worship you, three in one, and one in three.

We want to thank you for your worldwide covenant community, to which you have pledged yourself forever, in time and in eternity. We ask your forgiveness when we have had defective views of the church, because we've had elaborate views of ourselves, exaggerated views of ourselves. We hear your word as it comes to us across the centuries, no more boasting about men.

And we ask that that may be true in our own experience, and that we who boast may boast only in you. O Lord, hear us. Grant that the devil may not pluck this word out of our hearts, minds, and memories.

Grant that we may be not forgetful hearers, but obedient doers of your word. We ask it for the glory of your great and worthy name.

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