

God Makes It Grow

1 Corinthians 3:1-23

Key Verse: 3:6

by Kevin Albright

“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.”

In this chapter Paul returns to a troubling problem in the Corinthian church which he mentioned in chapter 1 (10-17), namely that there were divisions, caused by elevating leaders too highly. Paul re-introduced the message of the cross, and Jesus as the power of God and the wisdom of God. Paul contrasted worldly wisdom with God's wisdom. Paul's ministry was not based on worldly wisdom but on God's power. God's power is manifested in the changed lives of those who repent and believe the message of the cross. In this chapter, Paul urges the Corinthian Christians to have a proper view of God's ministers and of themselves. He also urges them to build their lives on the foundation of Christ. May God help us to humbly and honestly examine ourselves and repent of anything that displeases God or anything that damages ourselves or others.

I. We are God's fellow workers (1-9)

Look at verses 1-3. 1Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly; 2I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

Their jealousy and quarreling revealed that they were not spiritual, but worldly. They were believers in Christ. But they were acting like unbelievers. Paul said they were being spiritually immature, like infants in Christ. Here we learn that arguing or feuding with others is childish and a sign of spiritual immaturity. The Bible encourages us to be childlike, but not childish. To be childlike is to be humble, which is good. But to be childish is quite different. To be childish, that is, spiritually immature, is to be self-centered and selfish, like children fighting for things and calling each other names and whose four favorite words are I, my, me, mine. Childish Christians often complain or criticize or quarrel. They are more of a burden to those around them, than a blessing. Children who don't grow up cause trouble and many problems. Likewise, we Christians all need to grow spiritually. Otherwise, we are unhappy in our souls, we stagnate our own spiritual growth, and we are a hindrance to the fellowship of believers. If one does

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not grow spiritually, he is in danger of becoming an adult adolescent. We should not be an adult adolescent.

Why were they spiritually immature? Paul called them $\frac{1}{2}$ worldly. $\frac{1}{2}$ They were focusing too much on their worldly desires. The Bible tells us not to love the world $\frac{1}{2}$ which is defined as three things: the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does (1Jn 2:15-17). Many Corinthian Christians were coming out of godless lives. They were like the Israelites who, though they physically came out slavery in Egypt, were still saturated in a slave mentality and spirit (Ex 14:12; 16:2).

We must grow mentally and spiritually to Christian maturity. Ephesians 4:15 says, $\frac{1}{2}$ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. $\frac{1}{2}$ Then what does a mature Christian look like? Simply put, a mature Christian looks more and more like Jesus. Then how can we grow? 1 Peter 2:1-2 tells us how. It says, $\frac{1}{2}$ Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation $\frac{1}{2}$ $\frac{1}{2}$ A growing Christian denies himself, takes up his cross and follows Jesus (Lk 9:23). There are many Bible references to this holy battle of dying to our sinful passion and pride. Colossians 3:5 says, $\frac{1}{2}$ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. $\frac{1}{2}$ 1 Corinthians 10:10 says, $\frac{1}{2}$ And do not grumble, as some of them did $\frac{1}{2}$ and were killed by the destroying angel. $\frac{1}{2}$ The growing Christian gives thanks, rather than complaining. Rather than criticizing others, the growing Christian encourages others. He doesn't flatter them to make them feel good; he speaks the truth in love. He makes efforts to pray with and work together with others. He prays for others, even with tears. In a word, he is not self-centered, but God-centered, and he thinks of others. He bears the good fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Let's examine ourselves honestly: am I growing spiritually? Am I making spiritual progress with more peace, victory and godly connection with others? None of us is sinless, but we should be sinning less by God's grace.

Through this message preparation, one servant of God helped me to see my pride and laziness. Though he dedicated his day to help me and encouraged me to clear out my schedule to concentrate fully on preparing the message, I was reluctant to do so. Rather, I wanted to maintain my weekly routine, which included running with friends and coaching a track practice. Though I did clear my schedule of

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these, I found some rebellion in my attitude and a lack of discipline in self-denial. I repent that I have been living according to my own convenient schedule and interests and with minimal effort to save face before men. In this way, I have stunted my spiritual growth in the last 5 years. Lord, help me not to be childish but to grow and mature spiritually in Christ. Help all of us by your mercy to grow to maturity in Christ.

What was Paul addressing specifically? Let's read verses 4-7: 4For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? 5What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

We can learn three things here: **First, God is the one who makes us grow.** The most important word in that statement is God. God used Paul and Apollos as gospel servants through whom the Corinthian Christians came to believe in Christ. Paul planted the gospel seed in Corinth as the pioneer, founder and first director. Then Apollos came as another leader and watered the gospel seed, which Paul had planted. Through Apollos, the church in Corinth continued to grow, thrive and survive like a garden through his preaching, teaching and discipleship. Paul planted the seed and Apollos watered it. But, and here's the important point, God made it grow. It is God's sovereign choice and power that gives life to anyone, both physical and spiritual life. God decides. God gives the right. God gives the power. Genesis chapter 1 is a humble and powerful reminder that it is God who is doing all the work: God created, God said, God saw, God made, God set, God blessed, God separated. Jesus said in John 5:17, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." A mother and a father are both important in the birth and growth of a child. But there is one who is more important: God. Without God, there is no life. Without God, there is no rebirth. God is the one who blesses and uses a man's labor or not (Ps 127:1). It's good to work hard. But hard work is not enough. We need the Lord's blessing on our labor. One young Bible teacher went to an elder in our church and complained, "How come that person has so many Bible students and I have none?" The elder replied, "Why are you complaining? You should thank God who is using that person in that way!" God is the one who works by his word and Holy Spirit to draw people to Jesus, lead them to salvation, and enable them to grow. God works in and through people and churches. It is God who is doing the work. Philippians 2:13 says, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Whatever we do, we must try to see what God is doing in and through

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us. We can apply this to disciple-making and to childrearing. Sometimes we become impatient and push Bible students or our children to grow. That is like trying to push a plant to grow, or demanding that a 12 year old act like a 25 year old. God's work is not done by our push. Rather, we often hinder God's work with our impatience. When we see what God is doing, we can be patient with others instead of pushing them and we can glorify God and build up God's work. To God be the glory for all he is doing and for all he has done!

Second, the importance of coworking. Paul and Apollos were different in ministry, character and influence. But they were not competitors. They each did their assigned task given them by God. Paul planted and Apollos watered and God blessed their labor. In any team sport, the team's objective is to win, by defeating their opponents. Team spirit is very important. One standout player cannot win the game by himself. Even Michael Jordan needed teammates. The Christian life is like a team sport. In God's work, there is no one man show. Paul and Apollos were on the same team. They were not enemies or competitors. But the Corinthians were taking sides and competing. Paul says they were being worldly and childish. How about us? Don't we often get envious or compete with others, even other Christians? Let's examine our hearts and lives and repent of such an attitude, for it hinders God's work. Anyone who has traveled to Bonn UBF knows and sees the beautiful coworking of Peter Chang and Stephanus Park's families, which has blessed these families and the ministry. But coworking in Jesus is not easy. One person thinks: I can give my life for Jesus, but I cannot cowork with that person! That kind of life-giving spirit without love means nothing. But where there is humble and beautiful coworking in Jesus Christ our Lord, there is God's manifold blessing. One Christian struggles to cowork with a brother in Christ. But almost every time they go fishing on campus together, their effort is unusually blessed. The start and end of Psalm 133 says, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!...For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore."

Third, each will be rewarded. Let's read verse 8. "The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor." Just because we are to work as a team, this does not negate our individual work. Verse 8 clearly tells us that the Lord will reward each man according to his own labor. Jesus promised blessing and recognition for good and faithful servants. God rewards those who earnestly seek him. Sometimes we are discouraged when our task doesn't seem so glorious compared with others. For example, reaping a harvest is more satisfying and impressive than sowing the seeds. But God assigns to each his task. Whatever our task from God is, we should

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do our best for the glory of God. Colossians 3:23 says, *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

Look at verse 9. *For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.* Paul says we are God's fellow workers. That refers to him and Apollos. But it also refers to us. What a privilege it is that we are God's fellow workers! We are not robots or slaves, but God's precious coworkers! God could do his work all by himself. But he has chosen to use our hands and feet and mouths and hearts to participate in his glorious, eternal work as fellow workers. At the same time, we are God's field, God's building. God is working in us and through us. Remembering this helps us to have pride in who we are before God and to respect and love our fellow Christians as God's precious coworkers.

I thank God for his fellow workers who had a role in my conversion to Christ and spiritual growth. My Catholic upbringing helped me to believe the Bible, fear God and have a moral compass. In high school, one girl's testimony of Jesus' saving grace had a positive impact on me. About a month into college, a stranger invited me to Bible study right off the street, which eventually led me to new life in Christ. Several people helped me spiritually, prayed for me and were a godly influence on me to help me in my newfound faith. By God's grace, I have studied the Bible with many NU students in the past 20 years. I don't know if these Bible studies made an eternal impact on them. I remember one who encouraged me. I studied the Bible with her a few times and then no more. Much later, she contacted me to say she was thanking all those who had helped her to come to Christ. There is a beautiful song called, *Thank You* (by Ray Boltz) which describes how when we get to heaven we will meet all the people we positively influenced for Christ, even if we didn't realize it. Thank God who is working in us and through us purely by his grace.

II. Build on Jesus, the true foundation (10-23)

Paul continues in verses 10-11: *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

Paul shifts from a gardening analogy to a construction analogy from a field, to a building. The construction of a building begins with the foundation. To lay the

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foundation requires much time, effort and money. Under the Sears Tower is a foundation 10 stories deep. Jesus taught the importance of having our foundation on the rock by putting his words into practice. The house with its foundation on rock can withstand windstorms and floods. Then what is the trustworthy foundation which Paul laid? It is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the true foundation for individuals and for the church. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of God's house and of God's redemptive history.

Here, we need to ask ourselves: What is the foundation of my life? Some people try to build their lives on money or a career or a family. Some build their lives on another person whom they admire or on a dream or a human philosophy. None of these are a lasting foundation. Only Jesus Christ is the firm foundation established by God through the gospel. Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.

Look at verses 12-15. These verses tell us how to build our house on Jesus. Paul likens Christian life or ministry to building a house. A building can be made of fragile, cheap, natural materials like wood, hay or straw or of enduring, costly, transformed commodities like gold, silver or costly stones. Then what does it mean to build with cheap materials? Cheap materials represent our natural, easy-going, comfort-seeking selves. It is the life of avoiding sacrifice, the life of compromise. In the Bible, Lot was drawn to a worldly life. He himself didn't live a godless life, but his life of faith was too weak to influence his wife and children for good. With his faith, he himself could be saved, but he had nothing to show for his life's no fruit. He could not even save his family or his possessions. Who is the wise builder? He is one who invests his time, effort and money in building God's kingdom. He denies himself, takes up his cross, and follows Jesus. He struggles to obey Jesus ahead of his own worldly desires and ideas. He labors to please the Spirit of God rather than his sinful nature (Gal 6:7-8).

Let's ask ourselves: Am I growing in Christ-like character? Am I influencing others to believe God's word and live for Christ? Is my life and labor being built on Jesus Christ or on my own worldly ideas and desires? Before his conversion to Christ, Paul worked hard to destroy Christians. He thought he was serving God. But he was an enemy of Christ. Sometimes we're happy to bring someone to church, and it is good to do so. But our goal must not be to get more people to UBF but to help and pray for others to trust Christ and build their lives wisely on him. A young man joined a church and was enthusiastic. Later, he stopped going to that church and wasn't sure about anything any more. His mistake was that he had faith in a church rather than faith in Christ, since when he lost faith in the church

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he lost his faith entirely. In light of this, and Paul's words, we are obligated to help people to trust not in any person or church, but in Jesus Christ.

Now look at verses 16-17. 16Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? 17If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. Paul has already called the Corinthian church God's field and God's building. Now he calls them God's temple. Paul wanted the Corinthians to see themselves as God's holy dwelling place, with God's Spirit living in them. They were precious to God. They needed to identify themselves and each other as God's holy people. Then they could live holy lives and respect others. Paul warns that anyone who destroys, damages or defiles God's temple will be punished by God. Let's repent of anything that damages or defiles God's people or God's work.

In closing this chapter, Paul quotes two Bible verses to show again the folly of worldly wisdom. He concludes, All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the futureall are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God. Everything belongs to God and thus owes thanks and praise to God. The solution to divisions in the church is to focus on God and give him thanks and praise for what he is doing, rather than focusing on men and what they are doing. Paul admonishes Christians to be God-centered not man-centered. God is the one working in and through people for his glory and the advancement of his kingdom. Let's grow in Jesus and build our lives on him.