

THE POWER OF GOD IN THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT

1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-23

TOBY SUMPTER

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INTRODUCTION

Unity is a challenging thing, and it is challenging because it always implies difference. Similarity is familiar and seems safe, but difference is unfamiliar and can seem threatening. The wisdom of this world prefers parties, clubs, and highly defined uniformity. But the wisdom of God is the foolishness of men. The wisdom of God builds the new temple of God in the power of the Spirit.

THE TEXT

I Cor. 3:1-23: “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. . .”

CARNAL AND SPIRITUAL

Paul laments that the Corinthians are not yet ready for “solid food” because they are still babes in Christ (3:1-2). Paul wishes he could speak to them as “spiritual people” – as people who have begun to search the deep things of God through the Holy Spirit (2:10-16). The milk of the gospel is unity in Christ, but they are still full of envy, strife, and divisions (3:3). They are still acting like “mere men.” This carnal wisdom is specifically evidenced in their denominational rivalry (3:4). Paul says that he and Apollos played roles in the gospel coming to Corinth, but he emphasizes that it was what the “Lord gave” (3:5), “God gave the increase” (3:6), and “God who gives the increase” (3:7). This doesn’t mean that the labors and gifts of people are irrelevant (3:8), but he insists that ministers are “fellow workers” of God in His field, in His building (3:9).

WISE MASTER BUILDER

Paul says that he was given grace to be a wise “master builder” (3:10). This is the Greek root for the English word “architect” and the same word used in the Septuagint to describe the work of Bezalel and Aholiab (Ex. 31:4, 35:32, 35:35, 37:21). Paul implies that he is like Bezalel and Apollos is like Aholiab. They have both been given the same Spirit to build the temple of God. But as Bezalel and Aholiab witnessed after the completion of the tabernacle, God’s Spirit comes to dwell in His house (Ex. 40:34-38). But Paul knows that this doesn’t mean that everything every pastor or teacher does or says will prove to be valuable (3:10-12). Each one’s work will be tested with fire (3:13-14). The reason some people’s work will be destroyed while they themselves are saved “through fire” is because the Spirit of God is the fire of God (3:16, cf. Acts 2). The Spirit tests, the Spirit destroys, the Spirit holds the temple together, whose temple you are (3:17).

NO BOAST IN MEN

This is why Paul insists that it is silly to think we’ve figured out how this whole thing works (3:18). The church is built and held together by the wisdom of God not the wisdom of men (3:19-20). God’s people do not hold the Spirit; the Spirit holds God’s people (3:21). This is why we have nothing of ourselves and

absolutely everything in Christ (3:21). In the Spirit, we are called to know Christ, to search the deep things of God, to be taught by the Spirit (2:10-16) until we are absolutely certain that mere men are powerless, but the power of God holds us and all things together (3:22-23).

CONCLUSIONS & APPLICATIONS

Unity requires difference. But there is significant difference between difference and deviance. After confessing that this is all the power of God and the working of the Spirit, Paul will charge up the hill and begin attacking the sins in the church of Corinth (ch. 5-11). Tumors must be removed from the body of Christ. But after condemning those sins, Paul anticipates a reaction to the deviance which is an overcorrection toward uniformity which is not at all the style of the Spirit (ch. 12-15).

The Spirit holds the Church together. This is why Paul jumps up and down on the power of God and the Spirit of God (1:17-18, 24-25, 2:4-5). The kingdom of God is not in word but in power (4:20). This means that we should have moments when we feel the impossibility of the church. People who should not ordinarily get along are getting along. And if we don't have those feelings, we should wonder if the Spirit is with us. But when the wheels leave the ground, and we know we can't fly, then we know that it is the Spirit who holds us.



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