

## 1 Corinthians 3:5-8

## PREFACE

As far as the apostle Paul is concerned, a predominant indicator of the Corinthians' fleshly behavior is their "pride of ownership" in the respective leaders or influences to their congregation. As we were reminded in our previous session, this was the first problem Paul addressed in this letter after his greeting.

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:11-13.**

Without question the most prominent influence on the church after Paul was Apollos—which is probably why Paul, here in Chapter Three, reduces the names down to just two: Apollos and himself. Let's read the next paragraph.

**Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-9.**

v5

*What then is Apollos? And what is Paul?*

As our various translations reveal, the jury is split pretty much down the middle on the pronoun that sets off his two questions. The best argument for "what" (**neuter singular interrogative pronoun, ti**) over "who" (**tis**) is that not just the Greek, but the *context* calls for "what." The whole point of this paragraph is to diminish the importance of personalities. To ask "*Who* then is Apollos?" anticipates an answer such as, "A nice guy," or "the son of so-and-so," or "my good friend." But to ask, "*What* then is Apollos? And what is Paul?" anticipates an answer that describes a role or an occupation. Chances are good that if you meet a stranger and ask him, "What are you?" he will answer as if you asked, "What do you *do*?" and he will respond with, "I'm an electrician," or "I'm a bricklayer."

*Servants...*

And Paul's response to his rhetorical question is in that vein. What is Paul? A servant—a *diakonos*. What is Apollos? A servant.

**servant, ministers**<sup>kjvs</sup> = *diakonos* = probably **from** an obsolete **diako (to run on errands; compare <G1377> (dioko)); an attendant, i.e. (genitive) a waiter (at table or in other menial duties); specially a Christian teacher and pastor (technically a deacon or deaconess) :- deacon, minister, servant.**

That is, someone subservient, who serves others. As Pastor Jeremy recently pointed out, Christ's favorite title for Himself was "Son of Man." There is a lot of meaning behind that, but part of it represents His willingness to become something less than what and who He truly was, to freely associate Himself with those He came to save, and to serve them without reservation.

**Read Mark 10:43-45.**

*(diakoneo, verb form of diakonos)*

[He] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:7-8)

This is Paul's counterpoint to the self-centered pride displayed by the Corinthians. We can imagine that this did not include *every* member of the church, but we also note that it is not so few that he can name names, as he does on other occasions.

There is another counterpoint taking place that is less obvious. Note how in both Chapter One and v4 here in Chapter Three, when Paul quotes these individuals the emphasis is on "I": "I am of Paul," and "I am of Apollos." This is part of what makes them "mere men"; this is nothing but an attempt to exalt themselves by association with the leaders in the faith. But the literal text reveals the contrast, with instead of "I" it is "God" in the emphatic position. Literally v9 reads, "God's we are co-workers; God's cultivation, God's construction you are" ([Garland, after Yoda](#)).

The emphasis of the entire paragraph (and into v10) is that *God* is the one responsible for it all. Not "men." Men are just the servants of God ministering to His people.

*through whom you believed,*

Against their apparent fleshly adulation of these mere servants, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they were simply "channels of the act" (*dia*). They were not saved *by* Paul or Apollos—they did not believe *in* Paul or Apollos; God just used them to both deliver and nurture (plant and water, v6) the gospel message.

*even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.*

This not only sets up the details of service as explained in the analogy of vv6-8, but also foreshadows the lengthier discussion of Chapter Twelve about the use of spiritual gifts.

**Note:** There is no noun in the original text of this clause; it must be inferred from the context. Literally, "and to each as the Lord gave," which the NKJV translates most faithfully.

## v6

And now Paul expands the previous remark with an agricultural analogy. Verse 6 *states* the analogy, v7 *explains* the analogy, v8 *extends* the analogy. And v9 reiterates and summarizes the centrality of God through the entire process.

*I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.*

Verb tenses are important in God's word. Being aware of them expands our understanding of what is written. Unfortunately, these tenses are often hidden beneath the English, as is the case here except in the latest (2011) NIV. The NASB comes close, but is incomplete.

For our practical purpose, we can say that the first two are past tense (although in the Greek they are [first aorist active indicative](#), which means they mark definite acts that have already occurred). Thus Paul planted the church, and Apollos came along after and watered the seeds and the new growth. The third verb (*ēuxanen*) changes to the imperfect tense, which means that it not only occurred in the past, but is continuing. The latest NIV captures it.

NIV (2011): I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God **has been making it grow.** (emphasis added)

We see clearly in v9 that Paul, in this agricultural analogy, is not speaking of the *individuals* that were converted; he is not speaking of planting individual souls, followed by Apollos nurturing the growth of the individual's faith, but of the planting and watering of the church ("you [plural] are God's field, God's building").

What man does for God's kingdom is useful and might even be important, but the Lord is behind it all. And only what *He* does spans the centuries and millennia. Jesus Himself affirms our dependency on Him for the fruit we bear in another agricultural analogy.

### Read John 15:4-5.

With just a handful of words in v6 Paul accomplishes several things:

1. The ministries of both men are affirmed.
2. There is no reason to place one leader above another, or in competition with the other. They each played a role in the church and are, essentially, on equal footing.
3. But what they did in the Lord's name is nothing when compared to the Lord God—the One they *should* be focusing on.

v7

*So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.*

Then in v7 Paul explains or restates his analogy. If it was God causing the growth (v6), then the planter is nothing, the one who waters is nothing ("neither...is anything").

The apostle has not left his discussion on living spiritually. By focusing on the men who led in the founding and nurturing the church, the Corinthians are betraying their earthly, fleshly perspective. In this paragraph Paul is trying to change their perspective to one that is spiritual: *Don't you see? God is the one doing all this! Quit exalting the lowly workers out in the field and start exalting the Master who owns the land.*

*Fee:* Without God's prior activity bringing them to faith and causing them to grow, there is no church at all. Hence the point is clear: Stop quarreling over those whose tasks are nothing in comparison with the activity of God... It is only God who makes things grow!

v8

In v8 Paul extends his analogy, keying off what he said in v5b: "...even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one."

*Now he who plants and he who waters are one;*

The Greek doesn't help us much in trying to figure out what Paul means in the first portion by stating that the two field hands "are one" (which is the most literal translation), so we are left to determine this from the context. The NIV translators make their position clear in rendering it "have one purpose," and this may indeed be the best *interpretation*—but not the best literal *translation*.

In this verse Paul speaks of both *unity* and *diversity*, and here is the unity. The planter and the waterer work together: If no one planted, the watering would be useless. If no one watered, the planting would come to naught. (A. T. Robertson)

Again, Paul will expand on this in Chapter Twelve.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-7.**

*but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.*

Then Paul says something that, at first, may seem a bit out of place. He has just spoken about the unity of purpose in the Lord's servants, that no one is any better, or worthy of more honor than another based on their type of service. But now he points out that there is a part of all this, in which each individual servant stands on his own: his reward.

We could bask in the knowledge and promise that the faithful worker will receive his or her crowns in heaven. But I'd like to close this session with just a couple of other points.

1. Note that the reward is based not on results or level of success, but on *labor*. Just as only the Lord knows the content of any individual heart, so only He knows what has or will come from any servant's labor. This cannot be judged by earthly standards; only heavenly standards will do. Thus it may be that the super preacher who packs in thousands upon thousands every week may receive as a reward just a tiny fraction of that which the nondescript pastor who faithfully ministers to a tiny congregation for forty years receives.
2. Note the tense of that word, "receives." I purposely did not use the future tense. Oh, surely we will receive our heavenly reward, but one of my favorite passages, later in this letter, is one in which the apostle Paul says he is *already* receiving his reward.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 9:16-18.**

Here is another of those passages from God's word that the world will never understand. The faithful servant of our Lord—who serves not because he is forced to, or does so grudgingly, but out of love for His Lord is *compelled* to—knows a measure of reward in the here and now, for in fact his eternity has already begun.