

## 1 Corinthians 3:9-10

## PREFACE

Every day, for the last twenty-seven years, I have been reminded of the importance of having a solid, firm foundation for one's house. In the garage the slab is broken in one large area, and one can tell by striking it that there is a void beneath that area. One corner of the pavement in front of our garage has been settling ever since it was poured in the mid-seventies. The workshop floor also has several large cracks in it.

The brickwork around our living room fireplace tends to move up and down with the seasons: sometimes there is a crack in the top line of mortar, sometimes the crack is closed. There are several doors that betray the shift as well: one season they will close properly, the next season they may not even latch—or may refuse to open at all. There are times when we wonder why the house didn't slide into the pond years ago.

Our passage today is all about working and building, and just like v9 all by itself, it is all about God. The passage, vv9-11, is bookended with deity: It begins with God (*theos*), and ends with Jesus Christ.

## Read 1 Corinthians 3:9-11.

## v9

*For we are God's fellow workers;*

As I pointed out last week, the original Greek makes it clear that the emphasis in v9 is on God by placing *Theos* at the beginning of each phrase: "God's we are co-workers; God's cultivation, God's construction you are." So in the original text, "God" is the first word of the sentence.

**fellow workers** = *synergoi* (soon-er-goy') = from a presumed compound of <G4862> (sun) and the base of <G2041> (ergon); **a co-laborer**, i.e. coadjutor :- **companion in labour**, (fellow-) helper (-labourer, -worker), labourer together with, **workfellow**; **we get the word "synergy" from this, which means the same thing: to work together.**

There are two ways to read this, and since there are respectable scholars on both sides, one should not be dogmatic about it. The first interpretation is illustrated most explicitly by the KJV: "For we are labourers together with God." That is, the "fellow" or "together" refers to a partnership *with God* in their work. Thus the possessive "God's" in this interpretation should be read much as we might say, "I work with Harry, so he is **my** co-worker."

And in a sense this can be true, so long as we never forget who is in charge. If we serve through the auspices and force of the indwelling Spirit—who is God—then we are working *with* Him.

The translation that best represents the other way to interpret this is the most recent NIV (and just as in v6, a good *interpretation* but not the best literal *translation*).

NIV (2011): For we are co-workers in God's service

Not “co-laborers **with** God,” but “co-laborers who both together **belong** to God” (Fee). Here the possessive would be read as truly possessive: “God is the Master who owns us, and we are fellow workers under Him.”

I believe the argument for the latter, based on the context of the passage, makes the most sense. The emphasis in this extended passage is on the essential sovereignty of God, with Paul making the point that he and Apollos are simply servants (*diakonoi*) working under Him. So it would seem out of place for Paul to turn around and now say after that that he is a co-worker *with* God.

Then Paul turns from Apollos and himself to offer two more metaphors that bolster his point that God is the one in charge of it all.

*you are God's field,*

**field** = *georgion* = neuter of a (presumed) derivative of <G1092> (*georgos*);  
**cultivable, i.e. a farm** :- husbandry.

There is a logical, illustrative flow from v6 to this clause in v9.

v6: I planted, Apollos watered

v7: we may have done this farming, but God was causing the crop to grow

vv8-9a: Apollos and I worked together, under God, toward the same goal

v9b: you, Corinthians, are the farm land, the tillage, the crop on and for which we labored

*[you are] God's building.*

Paul then switches to a different metaphor that, not coincidentally, sets up the next paragraph.

**building** = *oikodome* = feminine (abstract) of a compound of <G3624> (*oikos*) and the base of <G1430> (*doma*); **architecture, i.e. (concrete) a structure**; figurative confirmation :- building, edify (-ication, -ing).

It can be a healthy mental exercise to consider this word as either verb (activity of building) or noun (a structure)—which it can be. Through the servant-apostles God is building (verb) a church in Corinth. Very true. But it is clear from the context that Paul uses *oikodome* here as a noun—a structure. Note in vv16-17 where the church (plural “you”) is referred to as “a temple of God.”

We could look at a number of Pauline texts that tie into this, but I think the best is by the apostle Peter.

### **Read 1 Peter 2:4-5.**

Here is a beautiful picture of one aspect of the individual Christian's intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus was a living stone rejected by men who became the cornerstone—the *first* stone in the foundation against which every other stone is aligned—of “a spiritual house for a holy priesthood”—i.e., the church. Then each of us, “as living stones” are added to this spiritual house, comprising the walls of the church, each one of us aligned with the cornerstone, and each one of us acceptable to God because of Jesus Christ.

And now Paul launches into his metaphor of a building. And we need to keep clear in our minds the components of this metaphorical structure:

- The **building** is the church;
- Paul himself is the **builder** who lays the foundation for the church;
- and the **foundation** of the church is Jesus Christ.

*According to the grace of God which was given to me,*

Again we begin with God. It is His grace that enables Paul to be “a wise master builder.” So if we, initially, think the author is a little too self-congratulatory, he can just point us back to the beginning of the sentence: It is all by God’s grace. Verse 15:10 could easily be a parenthetical expansion of this opening phrase.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 15:10.**

There is the healthy perspective, a healthy balance between the flesh and the Spirit: *God through His grace made me, he enables my work. By this empowerment I work hard in His service—yet still, it is all because of God’s grace.*

*like a wise master builder I laid a foundation,*

By this Paul means he set in place the foundation of the Corinthian church.

**Note:** Some commentators like to point out that *sophos*, translated “wise” can—and does here—mean “expert” or “skilled,” and so it is translated in the earlier NIV and the ESV. But, again, that ignores the Corinthian context. Paul is still carefully choosing words that address the church’s infatuation with the Greek “wisdom” culture, and here is just one more of his little jabs. If we think he has moved on from that topic, just look below in this chapter.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-20.**

What is this foundation?

*David Garland:* The foundation is the gospel, and its footings are anchored firmly in the message of Christ crucified.

The only foundation that will never crack or shift or fall is the gospel of Christ Jesus. Not programs or detailed systems of outreach; not a beautiful, expensively appointed building; not charismatic personalities behind the pulpit, but the gospel of Christ crucified as found in God’s word. That is a foundation that will never fail.

*and another is building on it.*

Paul laid the foundation, but eventually he moved on and others took up the building of the church. People and leaders come and go, but the construction never ends. The church is never “finished.”

*But each man must be careful how he builds on it.*

Now, that is the positive application—but not necessarily what Paul refers to. He is probably not referring to Apollos, or even Peter; the evidence that follows indicates that he refers to the Corinthians themselves, and that he is concerned about some of the divisive, “un-Spiritual” things they are trying to build on top of the foundation of Christ. He is warning them here—and goes into greater detail in the following verses—of the consequences of persisting on their present course.

Referring to being careful how one builds on this foundation, David Garland writes,

They must use fit materials and follow the plans of the architect (who is God, not Paul) and the building code.

Here is perhaps our best take-away from this passage: Even in a healthy, Bible-teaching church that acknowledges Jesus Christ as Master and Lord, we must always be diligent to build rightly on the foundation.

[Let's return to 1 Peter.](#)

**Read 1 Peter 5:8-9.**

If Satan can cause one person to turn away from Christ, he has made a nice meal for himself. Just think what a sumptuous feast it is for him when he can destroy a whole *church* by means of false doctrine, by gradually sifting into the church worldly “wisdom” that eventually overwhelms the gospel of Christ. That’s what was happening in Corinth.

The devil is a good liberal; just like his human disciples he is patient. When he loses a battle he does not give up, but keeps coming back again and again, wearing down his opponent until he has victory. And even if he wins a few battles, he is never satisfied: He never stops until he has won the war.

As we build up the church from its solid foundation, we must always—not just in our personal lives, but in the *church's* life—test the spirits, test that which is taught, test every idea to make sure that it is not of this world, not of the flesh, but only from the gospel of Christ.

For only those building materials will stand.