

True Ministers are Builders of God's Temple

The Apostle Paul had pointed out that pastors perform different services, but they are still one in their ministry. In our Second Reading from today, 1 Corinthians 3:10-23, Paul now explains further how important it is to be one in their service. They must be one in their faithfulness to the gospel.

Paul was the founder of the congregation. God chose Paul to lay the foundation for the church in Corinth. God also made him an expert builder of mission congregations. Paul knew his business as a missionary. He built every one of his congregations on a good foundation, that is, on Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

The pastors who followed Paul in the ministry in Corinth built on the foundation Paul had laid. If the congregation was to remain a true Christian congregation, those pastors had to build carefully on that foundation. Like the founder, they too must preach Christ crucified as the only way of salvation. Others were building on the foundation Paul had laid. *"However, each one should be careful how he builds on it! ¹¹ For no one can lay any other foundation than the one that has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ,"* (verses 10-11). *"The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord,"* hymn 191 begins.

In Corinth, there certainly was a danger that ministers would be tempted to build human wisdom on the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of their listeners would have liked nothing better. The ministers in Corinth would be tempted to do what so many pastors in erring church bodies are doing today, offering the wisdom of men to their people in addition to or even in place of the wisdom of God.

Paul employs a memorable illustration. Faithful pastors build with precious materials; pastors who do not hold to the truth build with perishable materials. *"If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, or precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, ¹³ each one's work will become evident,"* (verses 12-13).

What do the "gold, silver, and precious stones" signify? The best interpretation is that they describe doctrines and practices that are in harmony with the foundation, which is the person of Jesus Christ and His saving work of redemption. Whoever teaches God's Word and conducts his ministry in keeping with the truth that Jesus Christ is our Saviour is building with gold, silver, and precious stones. He is being true to the foundation.

On the other hand, the man who preaches the truth in "a one-sided, warped, watered-down way" is building with *"wood, hay or straw."* Paul does not refer to heresies that are so serious that they deny that Jesus Christ is God's Son or that His death atoned for the sins of the world. Such teaching would not be on the foundation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Rather, the *"wood, hay or straw"* doctrines are such that either add to or subtract from the truth of Christ.

There are teachings, for example, that hold that Baptism does not save or that Christ does not give us His true body and blood in the Lord's Supper. There are the doctrines of purgatory and of

prayers for the dead and the notion that we must cooperate in our conversion. They include making faith a work; they include legalism, the millennium, the charismatic movement. There are also false practices, for example, in stewardship and evangelism, in church government, and in Christian education. One cannot say that such teachings and practices immediately destroy faith in Christ and His atonement, but they weaken and distort the truth of who Christ is and what He taught. They are error mingled with the truth.

For many it may not be until judgment day that the “*wood, hay or straw*” are exposed for what they are - trash to be burned up. On that day, when Christ returns for judgment, the work of a minister will be tested. Judgment day will be a fiery day that will test the pastor’s teaching and work as fire tests gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw. The gold, silver, and precious stones will stand the test; the wood, hay, and straw will become ashes.

Judgment day is payday for God’s fellow workers. The workmen who used gold, silver, and precious stones in building on the foundation will receive the reward that goes to good and faithful servants. God will grant special recognition to them, according to His grace. “*If anyone’s work that he has built on it survives, he will receive a reward,*” (verse 14).

He who has built with wood, hay, and straw will be in for a rude shock. His shoddy works will not stand the test; the fire of Judgment day will consume them. He will have no fruits of faithful service to show, and there will be no rewards of faithful service for him to receive. He himself will barely be saved, like a man forced to leave everything behind as he flees from a burning building. He will be saved only because, by the grace of God, he still believes that Christ died, and rose for him.