

1 Corinthians 3: Feeding, Planting and Building

As our title implies, our reading from the 1st epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians describes three aspects of the believer's life: Feeding, Sowing, and Building. We shall consider each in turn:

FEEDING BOTH CHILDREN AND ADULTS

The chapter begins with words of reproof to the ecclesia, for not growing up into maturity in relation to divine things:

“And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. ***I have fed you with milk***, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are carnal ...” (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

Notice that here, the ecclesia is described as being made up of “babes”, who have been fed with the milk of the Word. Peter also describes the new converts in the Truth in a similar way:

“... As newborn babes, ***desire the sincere milk of the Word***, that ye may grow thereby. If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious ...” (1 Pet. 2:12)

Peter's remarks provide exhortation, but Paul's rebuke. The new-born babes in Christ require a type of food suited to their spiritual infancy, to enable them to “grow thereby”. But just as in the natural, so in the spiritual: when children grow into adulthood, they require solid food. Milk is no longer sufficient for them: they must progress into mature men and women who are sustained by the strong meat of the Word, enabling them to discern between good and evil. So Peter exhorts the new members to seek after the milk, but the apostle Paul rebukes the Corinthians for not progressing in the Truth, and maturing into adults. Indeed, the writer to the Hebrews also spake thus – again in rebuke:

“... for when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For everyone that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth unto them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:12-14).

Here, the believers were spiritually immature, and required to take their position as babes once more, learning the basic principles of the Truth. They were “unskilful in the word of righteousness”, just as little children have a limited vocabulary, and are unskilful in learning. There are some who prefer to remain infantile in their outlook, who discourage Bible Study, and the imbibing of the strong meat of the Word into their thinking. But we need rather to progress from faith to faith: from simplicity into wisdom.

According to Messiah, we must begin our spiritual lives by being as little children in terms of their teachableness: “.. Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become ***as little children***, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Mat. 18:3). But whilst we start our spiritual lives as babes, we must progress from childhood into maturity. The Apostle speaks of the early ecclesia as to develop, and “all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect [i.e. complete] man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with ever wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (Eph. 4:13-14). Being a babe is a starting point from which we need to develop, in order to eventually become a complete, or mature man. Such a mature man has his senses exercised to discern between good and evil, hence he is no longer tossed around by the changing winds of doctrine. Rather, he holds fast to the Truth as it is in Christ Jesus, and seeks the unity of like-mindedness with other brethren and sisters. The Apostle regarded

those who cause division as being still children; immediately after describing them as such, he continues: “for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving only in a human way?” (1 Cor. 3:3 ESV). Jealousy and strife are childish qualities, to be put away by those who seek only the right way, and to mature in their knowledge, wisdom and understanding.

PLANTING

From speaking about childhood and the adult state, the Apostle next uses the language of seeds being planted in the ground:

“... Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour” (1 Cor. 3:6-8).

The parable of the Sower informs us that the seed is the Word (Luke 8:11), and the seed sown is therefore the Word of God deposited within the varying conditions of men’s hearts. The work of the apostolic preaching was the work of sowing the seed in order to achieve an increase. But the work of sowing is not preaching only, it also describes the direction of our principal efforts in life. So Paul describes in his letter to the Galatians:

“be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Gal. 6:7-9).

There is also a highly interesting use of this idea of the Seed Sown in the first Epistle of John. In chapter 3, we read:

“Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (1 Jno. 3:9).

This brings us back again to the new-born babe. Whereas naturally, “the wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies” (Psa. 58:3), that which is born of God cannot sin. This refers to “the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Col. 3:10). Being begotten by the word-seed, this new man does not, and cannot sin against his Maker. True, men do sin – but that sin is performed by “the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts”. There are, as it were two identities within the believer (as demonstrated in Romans chapter 7), the New man and the Old man. The Old man must be destroyed in order for the New man to prosper. For those who are baptised in to the saving name of our Master, “our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom. 6:6). When we sin, it is the Old Man rearing up his head – and we must seek to destroy it, and nurture the developing New man within us.

Returning to 1 Corinthians chapter 3, we read that “every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour” (1 Cor. 3:8). This is not labouring in carnal things, as we have seen above, but involves sowing to the spirit, or labouring in spiritual matters. Those who are worthy of honour are elsewhere described as those who “labour in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim. 5:17). They shall be rewarded according to their measure of faith which is manifested in their works. The point of the labour and travail is to bring forth fruit - as Paul wrote, again to the Galatians:

“the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against which there is no law. And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts” (Gal. 5:22-24).

Here, The fruit yielded is a composite fruit, like the grape vine. Many individual units, but one bunch of grapes. So there is one fruit of the Spirit, but many individual component parts. In fact, Messiah himself likened his disciples to a branches of a grape vine yielding fruit:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it bring forth no fruit ... Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine: no more can ye, except ye abide in me ... Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples ...” (Jno. 15:1-8).

We need therefore, to develop the qualities of the Spirit, that we might give glory to our Heavenly Father by bearing much Fruit suitable for His use.

Finally in this regard, the prosperity of life in the kingdom is likened to a tree **planted** by rivers of water:

“... he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season: his leaf also shall not wither: and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper” (Psa. 1:3).

BUILDING

The Ecclesial edifice that the Apostles were engaged in building was based upon a firm foundation – even Messiah himself

“according to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. **For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ ...**” (1 Cor. 3:10-11).

The Lord Jesus Christ then, is the foundation of the Ecclesial edifice. As Messiah said to Peter, it was “upon this rock” of his statement: “thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God” that the ecclesia would be built, “and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mat. 16:16-18). Jesus Christ is the foundation of the spiritual House, and we are stones built upon it. Hebrews 3 describes the honour held by the One who built the house, “**whose house are we**, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:5-6).

Also, Peter describes the believers:

“Ye also, as lively stones, are **built up a spiritual house**, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5).

Here, the stones are Living, which indicates that the Spiritual House that they collectively form is alive! The ecclesia must be alive to the things of God, and dead to sin. Like the preparations for Solomon’s temple, the individual stones are prepared before the house is finally assembled, so that at the appropriate time, the house will all slot together perfectly. We are prepared by the blows of the tribulations in life, and we must seek to conform to the image of our Master, so that we can be part of the spiritual temple of the Age to come.

The account of Ezra concerning the rebuilding of Solomon’s Temple is most instructive for us. The chapter commences with a description of how the men of other nations came to the Jews, and said to them: “... let us build with you: for we seek your God as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assur which brought us up hither” (Ezra 4:1-2).

Naturally thinking, in practical terms, it would seem desirable to have as many labourers as possible, especially skilled ones. And if these men all worshipped the same God, where is the problem? The problem was not a practical one, but a spiritual one. These men were not of Israel. They were engaged in a corrupt form of worship, which may well have incorporated parts of the Law followed by Israel: but they were not worshipping Yahweh in spirit and in truth.

We recognise the same principles at work in the world around us. The principles of Ecumenicalism where churches join together irrespective of differences in teaching and doctrine are making their effects known upon the ecclesia of Christ. Here is the people's response to the Ecumenicists of their day: **"Ye have nothing to do with us to** build an house to our God; but we ourselves together will build unto Yahweh God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us" (Ezra 4:3).

This is what our response should be: "ye have nothing to do with us". The Apostle in alluding to these things says likewise:

"what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And **what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?** For ye are the temple of the Living God ... wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you .." (2 Cor. 6:15-17).

The Jews had come out from among the nations amongst whom they were scattered, to be a separate people to the glory of their God. There was no question as to whether those who believed in a god, or gods other than Yahweh, should be permitted to be part of the ecclesia at the time. Even so in our day, those who worship the mythical triune deity prove themselves to be idolaters (i.e. worshipping a god that doesn't exist), and cannot partake of fellowship with us.

As we come to fix our attention on Christ Crucified, we also consider our own position before him. There is much work to do by way of ensuring that brethren and sisters are being fed with the food suitable for their spiritual development. The growing seed planted within our hearts needs to be nurtured and cared for, as the Old Man of the flesh is put to death. And we must be built up by the Word of Truth to become a living House, alive to the things of God. But the important aspect to recognise, is that it is Yahweh's house, and not ours. He has provided the conditions and the means for its building and survival in the day of evil. Let us therefore give heed to these things, and set our hands to the work, upon the sure foundation laid by Messiah and his Apostles.

Christopher Maddocks