

Assigned - When Leadership Changes, God Doesn't **Sunday, June 7th, 2026 - 5:30 p.m.**

Tonight is a different kind of Sunday. If you were in this building this morning, you know. Something significant happened. I'm not going to spend the whole evening talking about it, but I'm not going to pretend it didn't happen either.

What I want to do is open a text with you that I think is exactly right for tonight. Which is cool because I actually wrote this sermon on May 15th, the day Pastor Don asked me to preach tonight. Just like you, I had no idea how today was going to go. I was VERY hopeful for this outcome, but you never know. As part of the search committee, we've planned and discussed so many aspects as we navigate this leadership transition. And the verses I want to study tonight are part of a letter Paul wrote to a church that was navigating its own leadership moment, and the things he says are things I think this room needs to hear today too.

We're going to study 1 Corinthians 3, specifically verses 1–17.

1. The Problem (v.1–4)

Before we read, it's important to know what was happening in the church Paul is writing to, because what we're going to read tonight was only a section of a letter Paul wrote to a real church with their own strengths and weaknesses. At the beginning of the letter, he was talking about divisions in their church. He heard that some of them were saying things like: "I follow Paul." "I follow Apollos." "Oh yeah, well, I follow Peter." Their church was becoming divided.

To understand why, you need a little context. When Paul would speak or write, he was blunt and he spoke plainly. You could even say he dumbed things down to make sure people understood him. Apollos, on the other hand, was a sophisticated teacher. He would use big, eloquent words so people would know he was smart and knew what he was talking about. Because in a city like Corinth, they were a status-obsessed, multi-ethnic melting pot. And to them, public speaking wasn't just a "communication tool." It was THE way to measure a person's intelligence, education, and social standing. If you could get up in front of people and wow them with the things you were saying, then you were worth listening to.

That's how philosophers would build followings. It was how leaders would have established their credibility. The city of Corinth had a culture that rewarded this. Audiences would rate, judge, and compare speakers the way people today might compare podcasters, or online-debate-bros. Who was sharper? Who was more compelling? Whose arguments landed better? So when Paul showed up and deliberately avoided that style, there would have been people who almost certainly would have considered the language he chose a weakness, so instead they would have aligned themselves with Apollos, or Peter if they were Jewish. Those preferences are exactly what hardened into the divisions that Paul was writing to correct. With that in mind, here's what he says.

1 Corinthians 3:1-4 - "But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, 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? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human?"

He wasn't calling them out for something crazy, like sexual immorality. He's not even necessarily criticizing them for some sort of doctrinal error. He calls them babies because they've divided themselves into camps based on which "pastor" they prefer. Team Paul vs. Team Apollos.

Paul was the one who founded the church in Corinth. He was there for a year and a half, planting the church from scratch. After he left, that's when Apollos came and started teaching. Apollos was good. Really good. So it makes sense how they started naturally dividing. For the people in Corinth who were baptized by Paul, Paul was their guy. After all, he was the founder, the apostle, the one who brought the gospel to their city. But anyone who came in after Paul left,

for them Apollos was their guy. And what started as a preference became loyalty. And loyalty became division. "I follow Paul." "I follow Apollos."

Paul calls it out for what it is. He calls it jealousy. He calls it anger/bitterness (strife). He calls it flesh. And then he uses this phrase that I want you to sit with: "You're just being merely human." You're leaving out something MASSIVE, the thing that actually makes the church, the church. You have access to the Spirit of God, but you're just doing what humans do. You

have been filled with something that goes beyond your own natural instincts, but you're operating as if you don't. You're running on pure human social logic: loyalty to your tribe, preference for your camp, identity through your leader. That's "being merely human." It means defaulting to your most natural, unredeemed social instincts instead of living from the Spirit. That connection to our situation tonight isn't subtle. Pastor Don is about to retire on the 21st. And after all he and his dad have done as the pastors of this church, this body of believers who have gathered together in different buildings around Newmarket, there is going to be a temptation to compare, or to pick sides. There is going to be a temptation to "be merely human." We have spent just over a year praying for God to send one specific person to lead our church. Maybe you have gotten your hopes up and started imagining what the next season of our church might look like before you even met Taylor. For you, there is going to be a temptation to compare, to pick sides, to "be merely human."

I'm not pointing fingers at anyone. Just like when Paul called out the Corinthians, he didn't do it to shame them. He says it because he loves them, and he wants them to grow past it. And the way you grow past it is by getting the right understanding of what a pastor actually is.

2. The Correction (v.5-9)

1 Corinthians 3:5-9 - "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labour. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building."

Those questions: "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" They read weird, don't they? The Greek word that in most modern translations is translated as "what" also could mean "who" depending on the context. So the question of whether Paul means "Who is Apollos" or "What is Apollos" comes down to the translator's judgment about what Paul is trying to communicate. Modern translators would argue that Paul appears to be deliberately depersonalizing the question. If he asks "who," it keeps the focus on personality and identity, which is exactly the problem he's writing to them about. If he asks "what," Paul is shifting the frame from person to function. He's not interested in who Apollos is as a character, or personality. He's reducing him to his role. Apollos is a servant. A servant is an instrument. It's a tool God can use. But guess what, Paul was also a servant.

But then Paul adds four words that I think are the most important words in this entire passage for a Sunday like today: "As the Lord assigned." Paul didn't assign himself to Corinth. Apollos didn't show up on his own. The Lord assigned them. He placed them. He determined who would plant and He determined who would water.

That means the person who stood behind the pulpit this morning, or whoever stands behind it fifty years from now, is there because the Lord assigned it. Pastoral placement isn't a committee decision. Just like Paul and Apollos, the search committee is an instrument. The board is a tool. God is the one who has done the assigning.

I know how powerful that sentence is, especially after this morning. I've been in the room for this search process. I've seen how this process worked. I've watched people pray and seek God over this.

And I keep coming back to this: if we believe that God assigns, then whatever happened this morning was not outside His knowledge or His hand. That's not a deflection. That's actually the most stabilizing thing I know how to say right now. Paul continues painting a picture of what a pastor's work looks like. He says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." It looks like the kind of work a farmer does. Except that a pastor doesn't have permanently dirty fingernails and the ability to predict the weather through their sore knee.

A farmer's work is real. It's demanding. You break up the ground. You put a seed in the soil. Then you water it. You look after it and protect it from weeds. And then you come back and do it again, and again. It costs something. But there is one thing even the world's greatest farmer can't do. They can't make a seed germinate. They can't make a root form. They can't make a plant push up through the soil toward the light. They can and will do everything in their power to create the right conditions, but then they need to wait. Because growth is not in their hands. It never was.

Paul uses this image on purpose. He wants the Corinthians to see that the planting and the watering is real work. We know that because if they don't plant or water, then nothing will grow. But neither of those tasks is what makes something actually grow. "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." This isn't false humility. Paul is telling the theological truth about how growth actually works. The pastor IS NOT the source. He never was, and he never will be. That's his point.

And then verse 8 says something that often gets skipped: "He who plants and he who waters are one." One. Not rivals. Not in competition. Pastor Don and Pastor Taylor are working the same field. They're working for the same God. And then the verse that closes this section: "You are God's field, God's building." It's not the pastor's field. It's not the board's project. It's not the search committee's outcome. It's God's field. God's building. That means the ownership of this church has never changed hands, and it's not changing hands today. It belongs to THE ONE who grew it.

3. The Foundation (v.10–17)

1 Corinthians 3:10-11 - "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

Paul now goes one level deeper. He shifts from farming to construction, same point but from a different angle, because he wants to make sure you know what you're actually building on. Paul describes himself as a master builder, someone who laid a foundation and then handed the construction off to others to build on top of it. And his instruction to whoever comes after him is: "Be careful how you build."

Then he makes the definitive statement: "The only foundation worth building on is Jesus Christ." It's not built on a vision statement. It's not built on a theological framework. Or on a personality, a leadership style, or a preaching philosophy. The ONLY foundation worth building on is Jesus Christ.

Every pastor who has ever stood in this building has been building on that foundation. And here is the thing about a foundation: it doesn't change when the builder changes. It was here before the first pastor showed up. It will be here after the last one leaves.

And then we get to verses 12–17 and things take a turn, but hang in there with me.

1 Corinthians 3:12-15 - "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

Two categories of building material. Things that survive fire: gold, silver, precious stones. Things that don't: wood, hay, straw.

Paul is making a heavy point. There is a day coming, he calls it "the Day," when the fire of God's judgment will reveal what will actually last. What was built with care and faithfulness and truth, and what will survive. What was built for appearances, or out of wrong motives, or with careless theology, that will burn.

This warning isn't only for pastors, I hate to break it to you. This is a word for every person in this room. Paul said back in verse 9 that we are all God's fellow workers. We are all builders. Which means either you are contributing something to this church, or you're not. It means you're either building something on top of the foundation, or you're not.

The question for this next season wasn't only "Who is going to lead this church?" The question is: "What kind of builders are WE going to be?" What quality of material are we going to bring?

Gold, silver, precious stones? That's things like prayer, discipleship, community, all the unglamorous work of showing up for people in hard seasons. That's the stuff that lasts. Or will it be wood, hay, straw? That's just going through the motions. That's church attendance without church investment. That's consuming without contributing.

The foundation was, and will always be, Jesus Christ. There is NO question about that. The question is: "What are we building on top of it?"

1 Corinthians 3:16 - "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

That verse is pointing at something the entire city of Corinth would have immediately understood. The temple in Jerusalem was the center of the entire Jewish world. It was the place where heaven and earth met, where God's presence dwelt among His people in a unique and tangible way. It was the holiest, most significant location in existence for a Jewish person.

And Paul looks at this group of people, this small, messy, conflict-ridden collection of believers sitting in a pagan city in Greece, a city that's absolutely full of temples to pagan gods, and he says: "You are God's temple." The Spirit of God lives here. In you. In your community. It's not in a building. Not in a leadership structure. It's in the people.

The word "you" here is plural. This is about the people that make up the church being the dwelling place of God. The gathered community is where the Spirit has taken up residence. That means this: the presence of God in this church doesn't depend on who the leader is. The Spirit was here before this search started. He is here tonight. And He will be here in September when

1 Corinthians 3:17 - "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

And that means something is required of us. We must be holy. Set apart. Different from the rest of the world. Not because of a new pastor. Not because of the decisions the board made. Not because of the work the search committee did. Because the Spirit of God wants to dwell within us. That standard doesn't change with the season. It's who we're called to be: before, during, and after any leadership transition.

Let me close with this.

Our church has been through a significant season. You've prayed through it. You've waited through it. You've trusted a process and trusted the people involved. And today was a HUGE day, a day that cost something emotionally for a lot of people in this room.

And here is what Paul will not let you walk away from tonight.

The growth was never coming from the pastor. It was never coming from the search committee. It has been coming from God, the one who assigns, who plants, who waters, who grows. Who always has. None of that has changed today. The foundation is still Jesus Christ. The Spirit still dwells in this place. You are still God's field. You are still God's building. You are still God's temple.

Don't put your hope in a person when you serve the God who actually gives the growth.