

2007

# Obedience—How Crucial? 1 Corinthians 3:15b: Saved Anyway, or a Misunderstood Afterthought?

Kent Yinger

*George Fox University*, [kyinger@georgefox.edu](mailto:kyinger@georgefox.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Presented at the ETS Annual meeting, San Diego (CA), November 2007 <http://www.etsjets.org/>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the George Fox Evangelical Seminary at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

## ETS 2007 Presentation

Dated: Oct. 17, 2007

**Kent L. Yinger, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor of New Testament  
George Fox University/George Fox Evangelical Seminary  
Portland, Oregon

Title:            Obedience—How Crucial?

1 Corinthians 3:15b: saved anyway, or a misunderstood afterthought?

Abstract:        In discussions of the place of obedience in Christians' final salvation, 1 Cor 3:15 has often played a role ("saved as through fire"). The nature of this text as a very limited caveat in Paul's argument will be contrasted with most other readings throughout its history of interpretation. The latter take the seemingly comforting tone of v 15b ("will be saved") to be theologically primary, rather than the tone of warning ("each builder must choose with care how to build," v 10b). The paper will contend, instead, that 1 Cor 3:15b functions as an afterthought in Paul's immediate argument (3:5-17). It is, indeed, a qualification of his warning ("the builder will suffer loss"), but will itself be immediately re-qualified ("but only as through fire") and then, in a slightly different setting, overturned (3:16-17). The implications of this reading for Pauline soteriology will be noted. I.e., Does this verse teach that a justified believer's salvation cannot be undone by sinful behavior?

If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor 3:14-15 NRSV)

This text “has become a standard proof for many that no amount of disobedience on the part of one who has been justified by faith can ever endanger that one’s ultimate salvation. Such a one shall ‘suffer loss’ but still ‘be saved.’”<sup>1</sup> The central role of this text in debates over purgatory may be less well-known to ETS members (“saved through fire”),<sup>2</sup> but its power as a proof-text in debates over the role of obedience in salvation should sound quite familiar. This, in fact, proves to be the case whether in a more popular vein,

Their works would be burned because of their carnality, strife, and division, but they ‘will be saved, yet so as through fire’ (3:15).

Here is a clear example of the contrast between the surety of salvation based on the free gift of eternal life and the uncertainty of eternal reward based on works.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deeds*, SNTSMS 105 (New York: Cambridge University, 1999), esp. ch. 7, 204.

<sup>2</sup> See esp. Joachim Gnilka, *Ist 1 Kor. 3, 10-15 Ein Schriftzeugnis für das Fegfeuer?: Eine Exegetisch-Historische Untersuchung* (Düsseldorf: Michael Triltsch, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation*, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville, TN: Word, 2000), 199. An internet search for “assurance” + “1 Cor 3” reveals the overwhelming popularity of this point.

in theological discussions, where such texts

plainly pronounce that one does not have to be a faithful Christian  
to get into heaven.<sup>4</sup>

or in academic exegetical studies,

Whether a Christian’s work is unsuitable or not will not endanger  
salvation.<sup>5</sup>

Some Christians will live worthless lives, their works, like wood,  
hay, and stubble, will be consumed in the flames of judgment so  
that nothing remains as a result of their life on earth. This does not  
mean the loss of salvation: ‘he himself will be saved,’ but will  
suffer loss of the ‘well done, good and faithful servant.’<sup>6</sup>

The phrase in verse 15b (“the builder will be saved [αὐτὸς δε σωθήσεται]”) clinches the point for most that this text is meant to give assurance of salvation to sinning Christians. This paper will show the serious exegetical and theological difficulties of this widespread understanding of 1 Cor 3:15b, and will argue for an interpretation which pays particular attention to the audience and rhetorical thrust of the passage.

---

<sup>4</sup> Norman L. Geisler, “A Moderate Calvinist View,” in *Four Views on Eternal Security*, ed. J. M. Pinson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 108.

<sup>5</sup> Lieselotte Mattern, *Das Verständnis des Gerichtes bei Paulus* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1966), 110 (my translation).

<sup>6</sup> George Eldon Ladd and Donald A. Hagner, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 612.

1. the problematic train of thought in 1 Cor 3:15-17

In the no-win game of “Which is trump—Theology or Exegesis?,” many of us in the Evangelical *THEOLOGICAL* Society, at least when push comes to shove as it does in this verse, will lean toward theological convictions. Whatever Paul might mean by one’s works being “burned up,” or that one might “suffer loss,” our theologies of election, eternal security and justification by faith alone incline us to hear his “shall be saved” as the more foundational statement in the passage.

On the other hand, as an exegete I am primarily interested in what Paul may have intended in the context of this passage, and secondarily in the broader theological import of the same.<sup>7</sup> Paul’s rhetoric, however, is anything but clear-cut here. Verse 15a is a warning to those who build poorly: “If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss.” This tone of warning turns out, in fact, to be the dominant tone throughout the larger immediate context (vv 10-15) and is introduced by “watch out!” in verse 10c.<sup>8</sup> This central tone of warning is followed immediately in v 15b by a quite different voice, a qualification which sounds comforting or assuring, “the builder will be saved.” This

---

<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, a spiral pictures the continuous interaction of theology and exegesis much better than the linear step model (first, second, etc.); see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> English translations face an impossible task in handling this third-person imperative, ἕκαστος δὲ **βλεπέτω** πῶς ἐποικοδομεῖ. Since English cannot address a command to a third party (“Watch out!” is always addressed to “you” singular or plural.), translations either use the weaker jussive (“Let each one take heed” NKJV) or a strengthened declaration (“Each builder must choose with care” NRSV). Neither is quite adequate to convey the strong warning contained in βλεπέτω, “watch out!”

seeming comfort is, however, immediately re-qualified in v 15c, “but only as through fire [οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός].” If this were not confusing enough, the apostle then appears to wholly reverse his “shall be saved” with a prophetic threat in vv 16-17, “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person.” Thus, within a very brief space Paul appears to utter

- a warning of serious loss [15a]
- a comforting qualification of that warning [15b]
- a discomfoting re-qualification of that comfort [15c]
- a (seemingly contradictory) threat [16-17])

I will suggest shortly a way to make sense of this rather meandering path of logic. For now I will simply note that what most take as the central theological statement (“the builder will be saved” v 15b) is, in fact, a brief qualification of Paul’s main thrust in the passage (vv 10-15a), and is immediately re-qualified (v 15c) and then overturned (vv 16-17).

## 2. Rhetorical Thrust, or Why is Paul saying this and to whom?

In order to assess why Paul gives an assuring caveat (v 15b) in the midst of a warning (vv 10-15), a look at his larger rhetorical aim is necessary. This text is part of the argument of chapters 1-4, which address the problem of church disharmony based upon competing leaders. “For it has been reported to me . . . that there are quarrels among you . . . What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ’” (1:11-12). The Corinthian church leaders are being viewed as rival wisdom teachers and the congregation is taking sides with the

one demonstrating the greatest wisdom. “If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. . . . So let no one boast about human leaders” (3:18-21).<sup>9</sup>

Chapter 3:1-4 forms a transition from the discussion of wisdom (1:18-2:16) to a discussion of leaders/teachers (3:5-4:21).<sup>10</sup> The Corinthians’ “jealousy and quarrelling” over differing leaders (3:3-4) mark them as unwise, as unspiritual, fleshly, babes. With verse four attention is then turned fully to the issue of the Corinthians’ behavior in elevating and evaluating teachers (“For when one [of you] says, ‘I am of Paul,’ . . .”). It is to clarify the squabbling congregation’s view of these leader-teachers in the church, as well as to clarify the leaders’ self-understanding, that Paul now writes 3:5-17.

Note, the issue at hand is not Christian sanctification or obedience in general, but a very specific area of Christian obedience—congregational leadership and the congregation’s relation to its leaders. Since this point is nearly always overlooked when readers come to 3:15, allow me to reiterate—Paul’s central concern in this passage is not

---

<sup>9</sup> “Most scholars today have returned to the view of John Calvin: that the real problem being addressed in 1 Corinthians 1-4 is one of partisanship.” Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 116-117. On this reconstruction see also Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), esp. 65-183, and Andrew D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6*, AGAJU 18 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), esp. ch. 7.

<sup>10</sup> See esp. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 121-122.

with how individual Christians “build” their lives, but specifically with how they relate to church leadership and with how such leaders are “building” the congregation. As he will state shortly, they must learn not to “boast about human leaders” (3:21) and not to “be puffed up in favor of one against another” (4:6).

In order to instruct the Corinthians as to how to view their leaders, the apostle employs in 3:5-17 a series of three metaphors, each with a slightly different point and with increasing levels of severity:

- In verses 5-9 the church is a field (“you are God’s field” v 9), and human leaders are agricultural workers (planter and waterer). This paragraph addresses the entire congregation and gently adjusts their over-valuing of leaders. “So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (v 7). A word to the leaders is more implicit—they are valued servants who will be paid for their field work (“each will receive wages,” v 8). Their differences are acknowledged but should be no cause for competition, since their service is “as the Lord assigned to each” (v 5).
- In verses 10-15 the church is a building (“you are . . . God’s building” v 9), Paul is the building contractor who alone laid the foundation, and another is engaged in the further building on his foundation (v 10b). For illustrative purposes Paul initially has Apollos in mind—in the previous metaphor Apollos was the one who watered and now he is the construction worker who follows the foundation-layer (cf. also 4:6). Paul’s real concern, however, is



not with Apollos,<sup>11</sup> but with the other leader-teachers in the church around whose building activity divisions are forming in the congregation. He tactfully avoids naming them, but their presence is not far below the surface of Paul’s language: “let each beware” (10b), “if anyone builds” (12a), “the work of each builder” (13a). If the previous agricultural metaphor was more instructive, with only an implicit corrective, this second metaphor utters a clear warning to the builders: beware how you build upon the gospel foundation of the church; if your teaching and leadership of the church are not in accord with Christ all your labor will be lost, burned up.<sup>12</sup>

- In verses 16-17 the church is a temple indwelt by the divine Spirit. Should any of the builders not merely build poorly, but actually destroy the church, Paul now threatens them with destruction.

Thus, in order to address the problem of church disharmony tied to differing leader-teachers in the congregation, Paul first instructs the congregation, with the leaders listening in (vv 5-9), then warns the leaders themselves (vv 10-15), and finally threatens

---

<sup>11</sup> Paul’s switch from ἄλλος (“another,” v 10b = Apollos) to ἕκαστος (“each,” v 10c) broadens the referent, and the numerous building materials (v 12) presume more than one additional builder. So Matthias Konradt, *Gericht und Gemeinde: Eine Studie zur Bedeutung und Funktion von Gerichtsaussagen im Rahmen der paulinischen Ekklesiologie und Ethik im 1 Thess und 1 Kor*, BZNW 117 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 259.

<sup>12</sup> J. Weiß calls these “energische, drohende Worte . . . an Stelle der verbindlichen, kollegialen Ausführungen im Vorhergehenden” (cited in Mattern, *Das Verständnis*, 170, n. 537).

these leader-teachers (vv 16-17), all the while with the church listening and, hopefully, learning how they ought to be viewing these leaders.

### 3. The addressees once more

Since most preachers still understand “if someone’s work is burned up” (v 15a, NAB) not as a reference to the work of church leaders-teachers, but as a reference to the individual believer’s work of building his or her spiritual life and moral behavior, a further word is in order regarding the addressees of vv 10-15.<sup>13</sup> Throughout chapters 1-4 Paul blends two overlapping audiences, the whole congregation and the unnamed leader-teachers who are related to the squabbles in the congregation. One example of the congregation’s presence should suffice, since this perspective is seldom disputed: “For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you [plural] not merely human?” (3:4; cf. also 1:10; 2:1; 3:1, 21b-23; 4:6a). Less obvious, but no less present, are the unnamed leaders. They are hidden behind the opening slogans (“I am of . . .,” 1:12; also 3:4) and in “these arrogant people” at the close (4:19). They are centrally present throughout Paul’s discussion of communal disharmony in chapters 1-4, but are always referred to in oblique, or diplomatic, ways: “another is building” (3:10), “if anyone builds” (3:12), “if someone destroys” (3:17), “if someone considers themselves to be wise” (3:18), “though you have myriad pedagogues” (4:15).

---

<sup>13</sup> For proponents and arguments of various positions, see Konradt, *Gericht und Gemeinde*, 258-259, and nn. 296-297.

Thus, throughout chapters 1-4 Paul must deal with two closely related, yet distinctly different, fronts. The first is the congregation itself, or, more precisely, the differing groups among the Corinthians. Paul instructs them regarding the way of true wisdom versus human wisdom, the foolishness of the cross versus sophistic eloquence (esp. 1:18 - 2:16), rebukes them for their carnal divisions (3:1-4), and admonishes them not to “boast about human leaders” (3:21a) since they do not belong to any human teacher-leader, but all teachers belong to them (3:21b-23). Paul does not address the second front directly, the other teacher-leaders in the church. Their presence and their importance to the congregational disharmony, are, however, clear from the beginning, and the words about cross-centered teaching versus messages of human eloquence have obvious relevance to them. Now in chapter three, and especially in verses 10-17, Paul finally speaks in a way more directly addressed to these other leaders whose teaching and leadership lie at the heart of the Corinthian disharmony.<sup>14</sup>

Since phrases like “let each be careful how they build” (10c), “the builder will suffer loss” and “the builder will be saved” (15) are commonly heard as a reference to how the individual believer “builds” his or her Christian life, a brief word is also in order regarding this “building” metaphor. Paul uses this Greek word-group (ἐποικοδομεῖν, οἰκοδομεῖν [+ ἐπὶ], οἰκοδομή) for the *mutual* upbuilding or edification of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Reasons for Paul’s caution in addressing them can only be guessed: he faces opposition from some of them (Fee); Paul cannot afford to alienate some groups, esp. since he otherwise agrees with them (‘strong’ and ‘weak’); his comments rely on the report of one group (“Chloe’s people”), and he does not want to be seen as taking sides in this quarrel.

community.<sup>15</sup> “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Rom 14:19). “Therefore encourage one another and build up each other” (1 Thess 5:11). The communal focus is consistent in Paul, so much so that merely “edifying oneself” is discouraged: “Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves [ἑαυτὸν οἰκοδομεῖ], but those who prophesy build up the church [ἐκκλησίαν οἰκοδομεῖ]” (1 Cor 14:4).<sup>16</sup> Thus, quoting Richard Hays,

Paul’s metaphors all refer to the community viewed corporately: the building that is built by the apostles and tested by fire is not the spiritual life of the individual believer, but the church community as a whole. The latter point may be especially hard for some Protestant congregations to keep in focus, because the tradition of individualistic reading is so entrenched. But if this point is not grasped firmly, Paul’s whole meaning will be missed.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. The qualification in verse 15

If, then, Paul’s main point in 3:10-15 is to warn those unnamed teacher/leaders in Corinth who are stressing human wisdom rather than the cross of Christ, why does he add

---

<sup>15</sup> See esp. Philipp Vielhauer, *Oikodome: Aufsätze zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. 2, ed. G. Klein, TB 65 (München: C. Kaiser, 1979), and Ingrid R. Kitzberger, *Bau der Gemeinde: das paulinische Wortfeld Oikodome/(Ep)Oikodomein*, FB 53 (Würzburg: Echter, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Jude 20, though not Pauline, is sometimes taken as counterevidence: “build yourselves up on your most holy faith.” Note, however, the corporate thrust (“build yourselves [pl.] up”).

<sup>17</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, IBC (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), 51-52.

the qualification in v 15b? After warning them of loss (15a), why does he appear to reverse this with an assurance of non-loss (“the builder will be saved,” 15b)? One explanation, noted at the beginning of this paper, refers the “loss” to heavenly rewards rather than to eschatological salvation. Thus, one can lose rewards while retaining salvation. This widespread interpretation is problematic for numerous reasons. Contextually, Paul immediately takes back this seeming comfort when, two verses later, he threatens destruction (17). Even closer to hand, the “shall be saved” qualification is itself immediately re-qualified with “but as through fire” (15c). Also, the audience and activity are misunderstood when the builder is viewed as the individual believer building his or her own life by obedience or disobedience. And theologically, this interpretation has occasioned no end of mischief by uncoupling sanctification, or post-conversion behavior, from final salvation. If one can build one’s life so poorly, so disobediently, that all one’s works are burned up, and yet still be saved, does obedience to Christ ultimately matter at all?

A much simpler explanation, which avoids the difficulties just noted, suggests that Paul qualifies “suffer loss” with “yet shall be saved,” not in order to offer comfort or assurance to sinning believers, or even to sinning church leaders, but *in order to avoid misunderstanding*.<sup>18</sup> Many Second Temple Jewish texts testify to a tradition wherein a final judgment by fire is passed upon humans’ works, resulting in everlasting destruction or in the life of the age to come. In one such judgment scene, an angel

---

<sup>18</sup> For a similar treatment of the logic of this passage, see Konradt, *Gericht und Gemeinde*, 268-272.

tests the work of men through fire. And if the fire burns up the work of anyone, immediately the angel of judgment takes him and carries him away to the place of sinners, a most bitter place of punishment. But if the fire tests the work of anyone and does not touch it, this person is justified and the angel of righteousness takes him and carries him up to be saved in the lot of the righteous.<sup>19</sup>

Paul has just issued a veiled warning to these leaders that they will “suffer loss” in the context of fiery eschatological judgment. Only in the next metaphor of temple destruction (vv 16-17) does the apostle envision their leadership as causing the destruction of the community. Here, their leadership is simply of poor quality. Like a builder using poor building materials (wood, hay, straw), their teaching and leadership are not in line with Christ. Instead of building upon the divine wisdom of the cross, they profile themselves with displays of human wisdom; instead of leading with servant-weakness, they seek places of power and honor. Disharmony in the congregation has been the result thus far, not yet destruction. Rather than receiving the expected wage for such labor (as in vv 5-9), these poor builders have labored for nothing, they suffer the loss of their wage; all their work in the church will have been for naught.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> *TAbr* 13.11-13. See also *SibOr* 2.252-255, *VisEzra* 3-10, *TIsa* 5.21-25; in addition, see Lactantius *Inst. Div.* 7.21. For discussion of this tradition, see Harm W. Hollander, “The Testing by Fire of the Builders’ Works: 1 Corinthians 3:10-15,” *NTS* 40, no. 1 (1994): 98-102.

<sup>20</sup> The language of “receive a reward” and “suffer loss” has been thought by many to suggest heavenly “rewards” (above and beyond salvation), an understanding central to the individual soteriological interpretation of the passage—A sinning Christian will be saved, but with no rewards. The Greek terms, however, are common words for receiving one’s pay or wage for work (μισθὸν λήμψεται) and for

Having just warned them of eschatological loss, and aware of traditions threatening ultimate loss upon human works, Paul quickly adds a qualification (“the builder will be saved”)<sup>21</sup> to make clear that he is not threatening them in this way. In the same breath, however, he makes clear that this qualification does not mean any reduction in the seriousness of the warning. Even if such poor builders will be saved, it will be “only as through fire.”

In the history of interpretation, this last phrase has been alternately connected with,

- a Greek idiom (“as through fire” = just barely, by the skin of one’s teeth)<sup>22</sup>
- an OT idiom (Amos 4:11 [“a brand snatched from the fire”]; Zech 3:2; cf. also Jude 23)<sup>23</sup>

---

suffering the loss of that wage, or even being fined (ζημιωθήσεται), and should not be overly theologized. See BDAG; also Jay Shanor, “Paul as Master Builder: Construction Terms in First Corinthians,” *NTS* 34, no. 3 (1988): 461-471, and Peter Arzt-Grabner and others, *1. Korinther*, Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament; Bd. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 154-155.

<sup>21</sup> The qualification- or contrast-nature of the clause is clearer in the Greek text. The αὐτὸς δὲ (“but the builder himself”) marks a contrast with the builder’s works in the first clause.

<sup>22</sup> Many commentators make reference to this supposed Greek idiom. E.g., Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. J. W. Leitch, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 77, and n. 85. However, Greek sources generally cited for this idiom witness to a different meaning, and this particular idiomatic usage does not appear to be present anywhere in ancient Greek literature (TLG search of πῦρ and πῦρ + preposition).

<sup>23</sup> Although the concept may be similar, these texts all use ἐκ πυρός rather than Paul’s διὰ πυρός.

- the building metaphor (one escapes from the poorly built, and burning, building as though running through fire)<sup>24</sup>
- a Shammaite doctrine of salvation by fire-judgment for people having a mixture of good and evil deeds<sup>25</sup>
- the doctrine of purgatory (salvation is obtained through the fire of purgatory)<sup>26</sup>

For our purposes a final decision as to these options is unnecessary, since the first three have equivalent significance in context and the last two are hardly likely (see notes).<sup>27</sup> In the case of the first three, the sense is that this salvation is obtained by the skin of one's teeth, just barely like a burning stick snatched from a fire or like a person escaping from a burning building. As with the previous qualification, this one is also introduced with the adversative particle δέ. The added οὕτως (“thus, in this manner”) suggests that Paul is about to make a qualification as to the manner of the salvation just mentioned. Rather

---

<sup>24</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, HNTC (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 89.

<sup>25</sup> See John T. Townsend, “1 Corinthians 3:15 and the School of Shammai,” *HTR* 61, no. 3 (1968): 500-504. The parallels are not compelling; see Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment*, 220, n. 63.

<sup>26</sup> According to J. Michl, the text “yields a foundation for the teaching,” though not a direct testimony; Johannes Michl, “Gerichtsfeuer und Purgatorium, zu I Kor 3,12-15,” in *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus 1961. Vol. 1*, *Analecta Biblica* 17 (Rome: E Pontificio Instituto biblico, 1963), 395-401.

<sup>27</sup> As Fee notes, Paul's οὕτως δέ ὥς (“thus, as it were”) signals the metaphorical, non-literal, intent (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 144, n. 46).



than the normal fullness of Pauline salvation, it will be "as through fire," just barely, hardly much of an assuring tone.

## 5. Summary of Exegesis

Allow this expanded paraphrase of the passage to serve as a summary of the exegesis.

[Vv 1-4] When the lot of you squabble over favorite teachers of wisdom ("I belong to the Paul-party." "I belong to Apollos' group."), you look like mere fleshly mortals, not people of the Spirit.

[Vv 5-9] What, after all, are Apollos and Paul that you should be squabbling over allegiances? They are but God's servant-instruments and their differing roles and abilities are *God's choice*, not a cause for divisions. I, Paul, for instance am the planter of your faith community, and Apollos the waterer. The growth of your community, however, comes not from either of us, but from God. So then, why make a big deal of the planter or the waterer, when the source of all the growth is God himself? In fact, the planter and waterer are united in a common task, and each of them is going to be paid by God appropriate to each one's specific efforts. Apollos and I are co-workers, not competitors; co-workers in the field that belongs to God -- you are that field.

[Vv 10-15] To use another picture, all of you together are God's building. I am the wise master-builder who laid the foundation of the building. Others are erecting the building on the foundation (i.e., continuing to edify, lead and teach). Let these builders beware! Whoever is carrying out this continued building

activity needs to give special care to the way they build, because the foundation on which they are building is the only one that can ever be laid down -- and that foundation is Jesus Christ himself, the wisdom and power of God. Different materials can be selected for the work that goes up on the foundation: some valuable and inflammable (gold, silver, precious gems), others cheap and easily burned (wood, hay, stubble).

Each builder's choice of material is going to become known.

The Day of the Lord is going to show it forth.

It is going to be revealed for what it is in the fire of judgment.

Each builder's choice of material . . . the fire will put it to the test.

Now if any builder's work survives, they will get paid.

If any builder's work burns up, they will be fined.

(Now don't misunderstand the point I've just been making; those leaders who build poorly—who get fined—will still obtain eschatological salvation, but it's going to be by the skin of their teeth so to speak. All their work has been for naught.)

[Vv 16-17] Here's one last picture. All of you together form the temple of the one true God, the dwelling place of the divine Spirit. If any builder should not merely build poorly but, in fact, destroy this divine temple, God will destroy that builder! God's temple is unutterably sacred, and you-all are that temple.

6. Implications for Pauline theology and current application

The main point of 1 Cor 3:10-15 is to utter a warning to those who teach/lead churches: “Each builder much choose with care how to build.” As throughout the NT those entrusted with leadership of a Christian group obtain the potential of great reward as well as of grave risk.<sup>28</sup> The three metaphors (3:5-9, 10-15, 16-17) present a series of intensified words to such leaders (and to the watching church who must relate to them) ranging from encouragement (each shall be paid by God), to warning about poor leadership/teaching (suffer loss [of reward]; i.e., all for naught), to threat of destruction (vv 16-17). In a day of celebrity pastors and ferocious party-spirit among evangelicals, this message needs to be sounded repeatedly for both congregations and their leaders. Those who use this passage to assure carnal believers (“but they will be saved”) are missing the point.

For the debate over the salvation of sinning Christians . . . . Unfortunately, the standard evangelical use of this verse gets most everything wrong when it concludes—A believer is assured of final salvation (albeit without rewards) regardless the moral quality of that believer’s life. It turns a cautionary afterthought into the main point. It hears an address to sinning believers in general rather than to church leaders. And, most damaging, it severs the theological nerve connecting justification and sanctification. The passage does not teach that believers will be saved no matter how well or how poorly they “build” their Christian life. It warns that leaders will suffer lasting loss if their teaching and leadership damages the church. “Let the one who builds beware!” **[23 min.]**

---

<sup>28</sup> Jas 3:1; Matt “if you teach/lead astray a little one.”