

PERSPECTIVES ON PASTORAL LEADERSHIP: THE CASE OF I CORINTHIANS 3:15

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THE APOSTLE Paul used a difficult phrase in I Cor 3:15, "Saved, yet as by fire" in his response to contenders. His response not only has it aroused opposing views among biblical scholars, but also it has significant theological bearing on Pastoral Ministry as a sacred calling. Ever since the middle ages¹ (in Gregory the Great's days, A.D. 540-604), the Roman Catholics have used the text in support of the doctrine of purgatory and they include it among other New Testament passages (e.g. Matt 12:32 and 2 Tim 1:18) purported to teach the "purifying fire" of purgatory.² The idea of purgatory in vv. 11-15 goes back to Origen,³ down to Clement,⁴ and back to Augustine.⁵ Townsend has argued adequately for a parallel

¹Joseph A. Fitzmyster, *First Corinthians*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven and London, Yale University, 2008), 202.

²J. F. X. Cevetello, "Purgatory," *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (NCE), ed. John P. Whalen and Patrick A. O'Boyle (The Catholic University of America, 1967), 11:1034. The writer agrees with Stanley in rejecting this view as out of context as will be argued later (Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians: With critical notes and dissertation* (Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock Christian, 1981), 68.

³Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Testimony of the Third-century Church* (Atlanta: Knox, 1983), 115.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*The Fathers of the Church: St. Augustine City of God*, eds. Gerald G. Walsh, s.j. and Daniel J. Honan (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1954), 24: 402-403. Augustine argues for an intermediate state between death and resurrection during which time those who have built on the superstructure with wood, hay, and straw go through "a fire of transitory tribulation that burns away the venial worldliness that can be let off from everlasting punishment."

between I Cor 3:15 and the school of Shammai which taught that individuals who were neither righteous nor wicked would "go down to Gehinnom, 'chirp' (cf. Isa. 29:4) and arise"¹ again. Zech 13:9 is understood as referring to such rise after purgation in fire. To the contrary, Evangelicals² interpret the text figuratively as referring to the unfortunate builder who will be saved, but through great difficulty.³

In view of the debate regarding the exact meaning of the Apostle Paul's statement "saved, yet as by fire," it is significant to examine the text for ourselves within its larger and immediate context in order to establish what it meant to the original audience, as well as its application to the present readers, especially on ministerial leadership. Even though arguments for purgation fire seem appealing,⁴ it will be argued that *sōthēsetai, hutōs de hos dia puros* "σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός" "saved yet as through fire" is best understood figuratively as a comparative phrase, and Paul's use of other images within the pericope must be considered when arriving at the final meaning of v.15. Thus "Saved as by fire" portrays the difficult manner in which the careless workman is saved—as one escaping by grace from a burning house.

In other words, Paul's intent in I Cor 3:10-15 is to present the role of ministerial leadership in the context of the Last Day and Final Judgment. By the phrase "Saved, yet as by fire" the Apostle Paul seeks to place the Gospel ministry in its proper perspective

¹According to Townsend, The parallelism between the baraita, which is to be found in Rosh ha-Shanah 16b-17a bar, and I Cor 3:15 is striking. He argues that like the baraita, Paul is speaking about Corinthian teachers who were not entirely evil, since they had done their building on Jesus (vss. 10-12, but they had not built well; thus purgation fire will refine them, (John T. Townsend, "I Corinthians 3:15 and the School of Shammai," *The Harvard Theological Review* 65 (1968): 500-04.

²Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries: The First Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Corinthians*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, Trans., John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 77-78.

³Ibid.

⁴The comparison of Paul with Judaism as one may wrongly see similarities where there is none, for one is an individual, and the other is a group, besides the Christian faith shaped Paul's outlook not only that of Judaism (E.P. Sanders, "Patterns of Religion in Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: A Holistic Method of Comparison" *Harvard Theological Review* (1973), 66:455-478.

as a sacred and serious calling; hence, ministers are challenged to watch their teaching and influence, lest by their wrong example, souls might be led to eternal perdition.

1. Literary Analysis

1.1 The Structure

In so far as the structure of I Corinthians is concerned, there is widespread agreement of a two-part segment that was occasioned by the Apostle Paul's response to a) oral information he had received (chapter 3 belongs here, I Cor 1:10-4:21; 5; 11:17-34), and b) to the letter from Corinth (7:1-16:12); it always begins with *Peri de* "Now concerning . . ."¹ I Corinthians 3 (to which the text under consideration belongs), falls under the first section in which Paul responds to oral information he had heard "by them which are of the house of Chlo'e" (I Cor 1:11). It is proper at this juncture to note how the texts in chapter 3 relate to one another as the Apostle Paul builds his argument, and Fitzmyer's analysis of I Cor 3 is appropriate here. According to Fitzmyer, Paul makes four clarifications in chapter 3. First both Paul and Apollos are only "servants" *diakonoi* (v. 5, δῆκονοι), or "God's co-workers" *sunergoi* (v. 9, συνεργοί), assigned specific duties by God the owner, answerable to God, and evaluated in due course by Him alone (3:10b, 12-15). God, not man is the centre of the pericope (vv. 6, 7, 9, 10, 16, 17, 19, and 23). Second Paul uses three images of the church to clarify his point: a) the church as a field and himself a planter (3:6-9a); b) the church as a building and himself an expert builder and founder of the Corinthian church (3:10-15); and c) the building material include gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw (3:12). Third, God makes the growth (3:6-7), and that only Jesus is the true foundation (of the church (3:11). Lastly, Corinthians are only a) God's field and building (3:9), b) the temple of God (3:16a, 17b), and c) the Spirit of God abides (3:16b).²

By means of these images, Paul argues that both he and Apollos were fellow workers; Paul planted the church and went to open new mission territories. Apollos nurtured the flock, but God

¹J. C. Hurd, Jr., *The Origin of I Corinthians* (New York: Seabury, 1965), 62. The writer supports this view for it is evident from the Greek text.

²Ibid.

caused the growth. God will reward the co-workers, but the field belongs to God. Paul is the Master builder, and Jesus whom he had preached to them is the foundation (1:23, 24). Hence each builder must build with correct materials on the foundation in anticipation of testing by fire.¹ Finally, Corinthians are "the temple of God," because the Spirit of God dwells in them; they are holy (*hagioi*)--separated to God's cultic service.²

1.2 The Diagram of I Cor 3:15:

A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
B)			
Εἴ τινος	τὸ ἔργον	κατακαήσεται,	ζημιωθήσεται· δὲ αὐτὸς σωθήσεται,
			οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός.
If anyone's	(the) work	is burned up,	he will suffer loss;
			But
			He will be saved
			But as (one) escaping through fire.

A grammatical analysis of the diagram indicates Paul makes a conditional proposition in v. 15, *ei* (Εἴ) "if" to show that the action is potential only;³ that is it does not reflect reality; it is only the writer's perception of what may happen in future to the careless workman.⁴ The building of the careless workman will burn up--he shall lose—but it is unclear what the nature of loss is. The second part of the proposition is analogous;⁵ *de* (δὲ) "but" compares the manner in which the careless workman is saved with that of the

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 106.

⁴Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 675.

⁵Schreiner, *Interpreting*, 102.

faithful worker (v.14); he is saved like one escaping through a burning fire. It seems chapter 3, especially vs. 10-15, served as a warning against workmen who were fanning confusion in Corinth.

Up to this point, evidence from the structure of the book and the diagrammatical analysis of v. 15 itself, seems to favour figurative meaning of I Corinthians rather than purgation fire of purgatory. To ensure every stone is turned around, it is time to turn to word study in order to cast more light on the phrase "saved, yet as through fire"

2. Key Words in I Cor 3:15

All the key words indicate that the phrase "Saved as through fire" compares the way of salvation the careless workman experiences in contrast with that of the good worker (v.14). While his works perish in flames of fire, the poor workman narrowly escapes destruction. The first key word is the adverb *ōs* (ὥς), which is translated "as" or "like."

Although the adverb *ōs* (ὥς) has several nuances, it functions in I Cor 3:15 as a comparative particle—that is marking the manner in which something proceeds, "as" or "like."¹ The word *hōs* has the same idea with *hutōs* which means, "so" or "in such a way."² Thus, v. 15 may read: "He will be saved, (but only) in such a way as (one, in attempt to save oneself, must go) through fire (and therefore suffer burns)."³ A combination of the two words *hutōs...hōs* merely stresses the comparative usage of the future passive *sōthēsetai* (σωθήσεται) "will be saved" in v. 15. The workman in v.14, *misthon lēmpsetai* (μισθὸν λήμψεται) "will be rewarded" for erecting a good structure on the foundation, but the building in verse 15 *katakaēsetai* (κατακαήσεται) "shall be burned". The comparative usage of the adverb *hōs* appears also in Eph 5:28, 33 ("as he loves himself"), in reference to the manner husbands ought to love their wives and in 1 Thess 5:2 ("overtake you as a thief"), , in reference to the day of the Lord that will come as/like a thief in the night to the unbelievers.

¹Walter Bauer's, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago, The University of Chicago, 2000), s.v. "οὕτως" (p. 1103).

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

Other examples include Rom 13:13 "Let us walk as in the day . . ." or I Cor 13:11a "When I was a child I spoke as a child..."; and Gal 3:16 "as of many, but as of one . . ."¹

It is clear from the examples above that the Apostle Paul uses the adverb *hōs* to compare events or actions without any hint that they must be taken as real. Likewise Paul is not stating a doctrinal fact in I Cor 3:15, but only compares the manner in which the first workman (v.14) is rewarded for his faithful service with the second workman who is saved but loses his reward to the flames.

The second key word of interest is preposition *dia*, which means "through." *Dia* "through" with a genitive in v. 15, functions in a spatial manner² as a marker of extension through a place, or object.³ In this context, "through" is a better rendering of *dia* rather than "by" (see KJV), for it is used in a spatial manner with verbs emphasizing motion as in 2 Cor 8:18 in reference to a brother who was famous "throughout all the congregations" or of the paralytic whom they let "down through an opening in the wall" (Luke 5:19); or when Paul escaped from Damascus "through an opening in the wall" (Acts 9:25; cf. 2 Cor 11:33). Whereas *dia* in the examples is used in connection with real events that happened, in I Cor 3:15, it is metaphorical and it stresses the narrowness of the salvation route the poor workman with flammable building materials will have to go through on the Last Day.

Likewise the noun *pur* (Πῦρ) "fire" in v. 15 is only metaphorical of the perilous situation from which the blundering minister will be saved. While the worker with a fire-proof building will be rewarded, the poor builder with a combustible structure will suffer loss, but not eternal destruction, for he himself shall be saved, yet as by fire.² or with bruises or at the cost of his lifetime work in ministry.

It is a paradox as Conzelmann observes, to imagine a punishment that does not cancel one's eternal salvation. Conzelman argues that although works do not save in themselves, they constitute an integral part of Christian service.⁵ Secondly that Paul is making a passionate warning in this pericope (vv. 10-15) to his fellow workers who are already saved by grace to desist from their current world wisdom (vv. 18, 19) and focus on preaching the Gospel of Jesus alone

¹Ibid.,

²Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 369.

3. Theology and Application to ministerial leadership

Paul's metaphors in I Cor 3:10-15 provide a strong theological basis of spiritual leadership in general, in particular for Pastoral leadership both as a sacred calling and as a driving-wheel for church growth and spirituality.

3.1 Ministers as Skilled Architects of the Church

Paul calls himself a *sophos architectōn* (σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων) "skilled master-builder." The architect had two major tasks¹: a) to establish measurements accurately for any slight mistake to the measurement would crumble the structure and risk the lives of the people; b) to lay the foundation. Great care was needed as only a strong foundation could support a building eight feet high or more. In establishing the church of Corinth, Paul exercised great care, by the grace of God, (v. 10), he laid the right foundation, which is Jesus Christ (v. 11), "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2) was the centre of his message.

This is why he could confidently brag himself as a wise master builder, and cautioned "each man to take heed" how he builds on it. The term "skilled" also means "craftsman". In the OT, God filled Bezalel and Oholiab "with the Spirit of God" with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts (Exod 35:30, 31) to construct the Sanctuary. Likewise, each minister must first be qualified by God's Spirit in order to be skilled in building the house of God. Only then can the minister exercise strict care in the choice of durable building materials appropriate for nurturing church members through preaching and teaching Christ-centred messages and living a Christ-like life worthy imitating. Perishable works include wrong habits in eating, in dressing, offensive speech, and relationships that lead a brother to stumble, and all these must be forsaken.

3.2 Ministers as Co-Workers

Second Paul and Apollos were "fellow-workers" (v.9). The word *sunergos* (συνεργός) with a genitive of person, means "one who

¹See Derrett, "Paul as Master-builder," 130.

labors with another" in furthering the cause of Christ (Rom. 16:3, 9, 21; Phil. 2:25; 4:3; 1 Thess 3:2; Phlm 1:1, 24); or "a fellow-worker with God" (1 Thess. 3:2). With the genitive of the thing (I Cor 3:9), it means "a joint-promoter," or "helper." The same usage appears in 2 Cor. 1:24 and 2 Cor. 8:23 in connection with the "advancement of the kingdom of God" (Col. 4:11) and "for (the benefit of) the truth" 3 John 1:8. As fellow workers, and servants of God, Paul appealed to Apollos for unity of action. For neither the one who planted the Gospel nor the one who watered is of any value, but God who caused the Church to grow. Συνεργός excludes competition among ministers; rather it promotes unity of action as the English translation "synergy" implies. The use of the cardinal number en "one" stresses the need for oneness to prevail--oneness in purpose and plan. The same word is used in reference to marriage "become one flesh" (Matt 19:5); Rom 5:12 "through one man", and Rom 12:5 "In Christ... we form one body," the present indicative plural ἐσμεν "we are" indicates something that is a present reality. Ministers of the Gospel can raise the spirituality of church members only when they are one in Spirit. As in Corinth, church factions portray an immature congregation (vs. 1-3), guided by earthly leaders (v. 4), and it destroyed the Spirit of servant-leadership (v.5)..¹

3.3. The Church as God's Property (3:10-15)

The phrase *theou geōrgion, theou oikodomē este* (θεοῦ γεώργιον, θεοῦ οἰκοδομή ἐστε) "You are the field of God, the building of God" settles the question of ownership of Corinthian church. The God of Israel not only owned the church of Corinth as his field, or building, but also he had a definite purpose for it (v.7). Paul and his friends were only fellow-labourers, and "each will be rewarded according to his own labour" (v. 8). A minister who understands the place of God as the owner of the building ("the church"), will clearly see his role as a "servant-leader" helping God to achieve his divine purpose on earth. The nature of reward is not stated, however, Paul is confident that each minister will receive a just reward.

¹"Servant" or waiters at table as the early meaning of the word implies, (see William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *The Anchor Bible: 1 Corinthians* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 32: 171.

3.4 A Day of Reckoning (vv. 13-15)

Fourth the Day of the Lord must be the motivation to be a faithful servant. On the eschatological day, each Pastor's work will be revealed for what it truly is (v. 13). The quality of each minister's preaching and teaching and its impact in building the church will be revealed at last. As such, pastors must rely not on human wisdom (1 Cor 3:20), for it leads to vanity and futility (Psa 94:11). They must build to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31), not of men, for human glory passes away and leads to divisions and factions (1 Cor 4:6).

4. Summary and Conclusion

4.1 A Summary

Those who apply the text to the fire of purgatory see parallels with the Shammaite teachings and other Pauline passages on eschatology as in I Cor 5:1-5 in which Paul urged Corinthian believers to hand the immoral person over "to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that the spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord" (I Cor 5:1-5), and I Cor 15:29 which encourages baptism on behalf of the dead—such an action, it is claimed, is worthless unless there is a second chance for the dead.¹

However, a biblical text should not be interpreted primarily on the basis of parallels with a non canonical text. Faithful exegesis of the text itself must guide biblical scholarship. Second reference to other Pauline passages (e.g. I Cor 5:1-5' cf. I Cor 15:29) as further evidence of the purgation of the soul by fire in eschatology is not only a matter of interpretation, but also unconvincing.²

There is sufficient evidence from this exegesis that nothing in the text itself can be urged in support of purgation fire. The

¹Townsend, "I Cor 3:15" *HTR*, 503.

²Fee discusses in detail the opposing views on I Cor 5:1-5, and concludes that Paul has in view the destruction of the carnal nature so that the immoral person might be saved in eschatology; "flesh" and "spirit" refer to the complete person as a human being; the destruction of the sinful nature is another metaphor as "crucifying" it (Gal 5:24; cf. Rom 7:5-6) (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 212.

structure of I Corinthians indicates Paul is dealing with the question of divisions in the church; ministers fanned a party spirit in Corinth; Paul wrote to correct the misdirected leaders warning them about the day of reckoning when each minister's work would be revealed in fire.

The syntactical analysis of v. 15 has demonstrated two points: a) that *hutōs* and *hōs* are functioning as comparative conjunctions indicating the manner in which the slothful minister is saved. They are translated: "as", "just as", "thus", or "in this manner" — the second worker is saved "just as one passing through fire"; b) the word *ei* "if" is a conditional conjunction stating a condition that must occur before a certain action occurs. Thus if the workman's structure is burnt, he himself will not die, but will be saved with difficulty—just as one passing through fire with burns.

Unlike Paul's friends whose message is divisive (1:12), Paul preached an inclusive gospel; as Fitzmyer notes, an inclusio of genitives in 3:22 overturns the party spirit to "all belongs to you," even Paul, Apollos, and Cephas.¹ Finally, Paul proposes a special model of Pastoral Ministry which accords specialization (v.5), it is complimentary (v.6), promotes equality (v. 9), holds a common vision (v. 8), encourages cooperation not competition (v. 4), quality control (vs. 12-14), motivational and rewarded at last (v. 8).

The foundation of the servant-leadership model is Jesus Christ (no other foundation, v. 11), and the building project is the local congregation. The builders must be equipped with essential ministerial tools including a knowledge of hermeneutics and homiletics, but more importantly they must be taught by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2: 10, 12-14).

4.2 Conclusion

Having examined the syntax and selected words in I Corinthian 3:15, this study concludes that the expression "Saved, yet as through fire" is a metaphor describing a narrow escape. Unfaithful teachers of the Gospel may through their errors lead souls to perdition, but they will themselves repent and be saved on the great eschatological Day.