

Text: 1 Corinthians 3.1-9  
St Stephen's

Oct 11/12, 2008  
Sat/Sun

## Who Owns the Church?



This is an artist's drawing of one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the **lighthouse of Alexandria** called 'the pharos'. It was built about 250 years before Christ to guard the port of Alexandria in Egypt. It took some 20 years to build, and **was the life project of a builder and engineering genius named Sostratus**.

It rose up over 45 stories, and was among **the tallest man-made structures on Earth for some fourteen centuries**. It lasted until about 1100 AD, when it was brought down by earthquakes! During all those centuries, only two known man-made structures in the whole world, both pyramids, are known to have been taller.

The lighthouse had a fire and reflective mirrors at the top, which made it visible to sailors from dozens of miles away. It had an observation deck, complete with a café! No one had ever seen anything like it, and **it soon had a fame of its own**. It found its way onto Roman coins, and into local legend.

The lighthouse project was sponsored **by King Ptolemy** of Egypt and finished during the reign of his son. According to ancient story **Sostratus wanted to put his name** on the base of the great structure, but was forbidden by Ptolemy. Instead, he was ordered to put only the

King's name on it. The King knew that there had never been a building like this, and that **it would bring great fame**.

Through the creative genius and the 20 years of labor was that of Sostratus, the fame would be the King's, and the King's alone. The royal decision was final, and the wording was approved.

**Sostratus went back to work** to complete the inscription to the King. He **shrouded the base in curtains** as he labored over the inscription. When the lighthouse was dedicated and the curtains were drawn back, they revealed a beautiful finishing coat of plaster with a majestic tribute to the king. And **the King was pleased** at the fame that came his way.

Decades later, though, and long after the King and Sostratus had died, the waves and the storms took their toll on the wall of the base. The finishing plaster was eventually washed away, revealing **a different inscription carved into the stone** itself, that had been long covered by the plaster. *"Built by Sostratus, the son of Dexiphanes of Knidos, on behalf of those who sail the seas and their Saviour gods"*

It is just a great story. It is easy to **sympathize** with Sostratus, and to **admire** his ingenuity! And you can **identify** with his passion to have his name, his creative genius and his decades of labor remembered.

**People want to have their name remembered.** Kings and craftsmen, wealthy and poor – we have **an instinctive pride** over the things we give our lives to, an instinctive sense of **ownership**. We use **the possessive case** frequently, easily: We talk about **my** house, **my** job, **my** wife, **my** children. We can tell you about **my** career, **my** church, and **my** bank accounts. I have agreed to make my wife a **new dining room table**, so I've been getting my woodworking tools back in gear. It will be a large table, hoping to seat 10 or more. And I will probably find a way to sneak **my signature** on it somewhere.

This is what Dallas Willard calls '**the human project**', and it is the kind of spirituality behind the Corinthian problem. It is the kind of spirituality

that emphasizes **what I can do, or what I have done**. Oh, don't get me wrong. We talk about God enough and the Gospel enough, but behind it and under it, it **always seems to come back to me**. It is easy to carry on the human project in the name of Christ, and that is what was happening in the church in Corinth. People were **putting their signature all over it**.

**Remember their slogans?** Paul repeats them in this third chapter:

*One says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apol'los,"*  
1 Co 3.4

**The key** to understanding their problem is to note that the most **frequent word** in the report from Corinth is **the word, 'I'**. Their faith in Christ had been twisted into spiritual pride, where they had fallen into judging each other in the name of their favorite leaders. Underneath it all was a sense of self-importance and arrogance. **"It's all about me. My smarts. My preferences. My competencies. My opinions."**

There is a **problem** with **this spirituality. It always fails**. It always falls short. We are in the midst of a massive failure these days with the collapse of the **stock market**. It has been a frightening week. Billions of dollars of investments evaporating in days. Pensions and life savings are threatened.

And have you noticed that **no one is stepping up** to take responsibility. No signatures on this disaster. And no **one seems to understand** it. And **no one seems to know what to do** about it. It is a frightening moment, and a blunt lesson about the limits of human capacities.

**Paul's picks up the theme about the limits of human capacities:**

*for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving like normal men?*  
1 Co 3.3

You are behaving like mere men. Normal people. And that's just not enough. You will just get jealous and angry and you are trying to put your signature over everything!

**Whose signature** is on the Church? Who owns it, who controls it? That is an important question to be asking as we head into fights about control over property.

Paul answers that question in 1 Cor 3 with **an agricultural analogy**:

## **The Church is God's Farm**

The church is like a farm, workers in the field are the Apostles and pastors, plants in the fields are the believers.

*What then is Apol'los? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apol'los watered, but God gave the growth.*

1 Cor 3.5

What happens in churches is these descriptions become **fluid**. We all know that when you become a believer, it isn't too long until you begin to try your hand at ministry. You begin to share your faith with people around you, you learn how to pray for people, you make yourself available to be on a ministry team or a mission team – and you are a worker in the field.

And then **you want to put your signature** on it. You begin **to own it**. You talk about **your** ministry and **your** team and **your** impact. It is a natural thing. It is **what normal people** do. Then you are just a half step away from strife and jealousy and arguing...

Look what Paul says...

*So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field...*

1 Corinthians 3:7-9

He says we are nothing. Compared to God, nothing at all! Twice in this paragraph he uses the phrase, *'God gives the growth.'* We don't. He does!! We are hired servants working in the field. And we want to see

our signature on every vegetable that is produced!! It doesn't make sense, does it?

## Several closing thoughts:

### Get Under It

Everyone wants to **get to the top** of the pile. It is far better to **get under it!** Help lift it up! Give ministry away. Give honor away. Learn to like the last place, not the first place. Ministry is marked by the **cross**, not by **control**; by **service**, not by **selfishness**. Here's a **motto** for your ministry, for your life: *"It's not about me. It's all about God."*

### Let Go of It

We would often do anything to see God work in the lives around us. We want to see people come to faith in Christ. Parents struggle so deeply for their kids, or maybe you do for your spouse, or for a friend - but sometimes we work so hard to make things happen that **we squeeze God right out** of people's lives. Sometimes Remember Paul's phrase:  
*God gives the growth*

Can you grow a seed? You can't! Can you bring faith to someone? No. But God can. Can you send the Holy Spirit upon someone. Or give them repentance and forgiveness from the Lord. No. You can plant a seed, and water it and maybe tend the garden – but only God makes it grow. Let him grow his seed. "Let go and let God". He can do what you cannot.

### Enjoy It

*For **all things are yours**, whether Paul or Apol'los or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's.*

1 Corinthians 3:21-23

This sentence comes at the end of the chapter, and it is remarkable. We will come back to it next week, but let me finish with an appetizer. Paul is saying in this chapter that everything that counts, everything that lasts is **all God's**. So don't put your signature all over it.

But he finishes by saying that **though it is all his, he gives it all to you.**

He gives to you every leader, every teacher, every fellowship, every brother and every sister... Yours!

The whole world, yours!

Life, death, today, tomorrow – yours!

And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

It just bends your knee and floods your heart. **A man in my last parish**, "I am troubled by how much God has done for me." So am I.

When **the world cracks** around you, when **human projects fall apart** He gives.

When life gets tough and the days are painful, **He gives.**

When the future is uncertain and all around you spins out of control, **He gives and gives and gives again.**

It is all yours, and it comes **with his signature inscribed in blood** upon it, *and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's.*

**In that place you can live and breathe and flourish.**