

“Fellow-workers With God”
 Pastor Sam Richards
 3 December 2023
 Text: 1 Cor. 3:9

The setting of our text, 1 Cor. 3, has the fingerprints of a city boy all over it, meaning Paul of Tarsus! For example the agrarian metaphors of vv. 6-9 (tillage, planting and watering) quickly gives way to architectural metaphors in vv. 10-12 (buildings, cities and temples—stone works—as in the magnificent display in all major ancient cities with temples and public buildings. Building materials (gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or stubble) supply the imagery for judgment *rather than harvest products* (grain, corn, wheat, or various fruits). Yes, and despite these agrarian produces being conspicuous in the market places—mostly found in towns, or cities. This bias, shall we say, is evidence of authorship—Paul was not a pastoralist like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, nor a farmer (like Elisha, or Amos, the pruner of sycamore trees), nor a fisherman like six of the original twelve. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel and Jonah were city types like Paul. Jesus was raised in an urban craft as a carpenter—John the Baptist was an outlier, occupationally speaking. He ministered in the wilderness and died in a royal prison. His cousin, our Lord, ministered in the cities and died outside the city as one cast out! The natural theology we find in scripture is largely authored by shepherds like David, and our shepherd King (who identified the lost as **sheep without a shepherd**. *Jesus made more of farming than Paul ever thought to do.* Although when it came to the end of the age, both Jesus and Paul were eloquent on the similitude of harvest that attends the last judgment and the completion of all things.

As a practical matter, we need to consider the whole counsel of scripture. For when we think of God in nature, his centrality as Creator comes most immediately to mind. When it comes to his provisional role, the pastoral and agrarian worlds provide best evidence. But as for his historical engagement: cities, buildings, principalities and monarchies do well.

With that said, we can begin to assess Paul’s perspective: note first that he brackets himself with Apollos, **we are co-laborers, co-workers, co-gardeners with God**. There is no doubt in Paul’s mind who did the heavy lifting in the planting of the church, which is the field, **tillage** in question. It is God. The word tillage (*γεώργιον geōrgion*); *margin, “tillage.”* I am given to understand “*occurs nowhere else in the New Testament.*” The first occurrence of the word in the Old Testament in Gen. 2:5 where it is remarked that there was, as yet, no man **to till the ground**. This is followed in Gen. 2:15: **And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and keep it.**—that is, to serve, or to work (till) the earth in God’s field/Eden/the garden. Now if we follow the language carefully and closely here, the—cultivating implication is that **the church in Corinth** is God’s field/garden and we are workers in it (**planting and watering** that which God causes to grow and to bear fruit for food as implied in the curse of the earth affecting Adam, after the fall, **in sorrow shall you eat of it** (the ground) **all the days of your life, through the sweat of your brow while thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee** (hard labor) . . . **shalt thou eat bread¹ until you**

¹ This sounds as if culinary arts, or cooking technology had already been introduced—Adam ate bread, not just whole grain granola. And this implies the use of fire, ovens and at least some flat stone for making on. All this is very

return to the ground (die!) Gen. 3:17-19. Eve had her companion sorrows in childbirth, hard and sweaty labor. Whether these sorrows are commensurate or not is a separate matter.

“His (Paul’s) frequent use of “to build” and “building” in a moral and spiritual sense is noteworthy²”—both idiosyncratic and authenticating. (Vincent)

From the Pulpit Commentary: Verse 9. - **God's fellow workers**. Throughout the Bible we are taught that God requires the work of man, and that he will not help those who will do nothing for themselves or for him. The world was to be evangelized, not by sudden miracle, but by faithful human labour ([Mark 16:20](#)).

God's husbandry; rather, **God's field, or tilled land** (is the preferred reading). The thought which he desires again and again to enforce is that they belong **to God**, not to the parties of human teachers. The word "husbandry" may also mean vineyard, and the metaphor is the same as in [Isaiah 5:1](#); [Isaiah 27:2](#); [John 15:1](#); [Matthew 13:3-30](#); [Luke 13:6-9](#); [Romans 11:16-24](#). God's building. This is one of St. Paul's favourite metaphors, as in vers. 16, 17; [2 Corinthians 6:16](#); [Ephesians 2:20 - 22](#); [Romans 15:20](#); [2 Timothy 2:19](#) (comp. [1 Peter 2:5](#); [Revelation 21:14](#)). [1 Corinthians 3:9](#)).

God requires work/labor of man *beginning in Genesis*. When this thought is applied to the New Testament parable of the vineyard owner’s hiring practices, the opposition of this demand to the idle, unemployed, or the “loitering workers” makes more sense. This expectation extends from before our creation, to the metaphorical circumstance of the church in Corinth! Everyone has his part to play in working God’s plan, the work. Missions and-evangelism work (donations can function as “draft evasion”—we owe our labor besides) is what we were made for, that is, were formed to do in God’s church. The “work” (exertion) is vital, an universal obligation, and our engagement fulfills the Father’s will. While we do not communicate life, which is God’s sphere and work, we do provide for its nourishment and spread, and propagation by speech acts-by communicating of the gospel, say in Lewiston where the recent massacre has broken up fallow ground. So we are united with God in the divine operation (redemption), but separate in responsibility and activity—he saves, we declare that salvation. The heavy lifting of the cross Christ has accomplished *and now by proclamation of that truth we are the distributing agents of divine love, and the effects of the cross!* ***And this is just the work which we are entrusted with by God—our work is necessary, we distribute the bread of life, the real bread!*** How blessed the disciples were to gather up the leftovers—it impressed on them the full magnitude of the miracle! That God could have done all this by sudden miracle is beyond question, and that he didn’t so choose to do is equally beyond dispute—hence we have Paul, Peter, Apollos being **fellow workers—just as is every Christian. Every believer is duty bound to spread the gospel.** No one is to be idle, lazy, a loiterer in house, or in God’s field/church or the world!

discordant with the images of primitive man as a cave-dwelling hunter gatherer depicted in the “up from the apes,” evolutionary model! Of course.

² In this sense the two words *οικοδομέω* and *οικοδομή* occur twenty-six times in the New Testament, and in all but two cases in Paul's writings. Peter uses build in a similar sense; [1 Peter 2:5](#). See edify, edification, build, [Acts 9:31](#); [Romans 15:20](#); [1 Corinthians 8:1](#); [1 Corinthians 8:10](#), where emboldened is literally built up, and is used ironically. Also [Romans 14:19](#); [Romans 15:2](#); [1 Corinthians 14:3](#); [Ephesians 2:21](#), etc.

Alexander Maclaren preaches, “Now whilst this text is primarily spoken in regard to the apostolic and evangelistic work (mission—it fits with our own, “That all may know, love and worship God”) of the early teachers, the principle is the same which is a very wide one, and applies to all regions of life and activity, intellectual, scholastic, philanthropic, social. Wherever men are thinking God’s thoughts and trying to carry into effect any phase or side of God’s manifold purposes of good and blessing to the world, there it is true.” (Vol. 11, p. 31)

If we are the glory of God on the earth and so glorifying Him. We shall be like the Lord Jesus, sharing, shedding abroad the glory that was in Him!

In him, God shone for the first Christians—yes, he was God manifest in creation, immanent in our flesh—just so in us he is to be revealed to others. In him was eternal life, for he died without perishing, that same resurrection power is present in us! Yes, *we may die, but we shall not perish*; we shall rise and live again, forever. How we live should reflect that life, and light and truth to others.

If as we believe, Jesus overthrew death on the cross, then that victory lives on in us! If Jesus effectively abolished the temporal on the cross, we should live for the new order, things heavenly and eternal, and not as those for whom nothing has changed, for whom this is all there is. If we believe that nothing can overcome Jesus, that his victory is complete and irreversible, we should manifest hope, and courage in a contagious manner. We should be sending the message, name and power of our Savior; telling our story for he is the will of God incarnate; explaining our narrative that he is the blessing of heaven come down to earth and, manifest, or lodged in us, is reflecting back that love, that glory to him.

Now is **Christ risen from the dead!** Then it follows, **in Him shall all be made alive** . . . and we are privileged to be part of that transformation. That is what Paul is stressing when he declares, **we are co-laborers with one another as those submitted unto God who are in this world, but not of this world.**

“We’ve a story to tell to the nations
That shall turn their hearts to the right,
A story of truth and mercy,
A story of peace and light—
A story of peace and light.
For the darkness shall turn to dawning
And the dawning to noonday bright
And Christ’s great kingdom shall come to earth
The kingdom of love and light.

As you head out into the field, here is what you need to know: we are but instruments of God. God has already worked his secret influences upon the hearts and minds of those with whom we are to engage. *We don’t have to do that part because that is what God does, has always done—and that explains both our success and the receptivity we will encounter!* Those who have been prepared will have ears to listen and hearts ready to believe. All that’s left for us to do is publish the gospel! Distribute the good news. Baptism will follow, discipleship will follow according to the Spirit’s timing and the perfect will of God. Then we will have more workers, a swelling army of workers and when we have reached the four corners of the earth, it will abruptly end with the triumphal entry of

our King to reign and rule amongst us. It will be great, amazing, awesome and we will be there whether on the land, the sea, or in the air!

It really ends super well!

Amen.