

The Crisis of Faith Today
Will He Find Faith on the Earth?
Paper #1
Only One Truth: A Warning to Teachers

by

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Understanding the Difficulty Presented by 1 Corinthians 3

I begin this paper with a very personal reflection on a passage in 1 Corinthians that has both puzzled and concerned me greatly over the years. The heart of my concern has been to understand the meaning and significance of 1 Corinthians 3:5-17.

Here is the NASV translation of this troubling passage:

1Corinthians 3:5 What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one.

1Corinthians 3:6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.

1Corinthians 3:7 So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.

1Corinthians 3:8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

1Corinthians 3:9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

1Corinthians 3:10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it.

1Corinthians 3:11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

1Corinthians 3:12 Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

1Corinthians 3:13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.

1Corinthians 3:14 If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward.

1Corinthians 3:15 If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

1Corinthians 3:16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

1Corinthians 3:17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

I discovered quite early in my career as a bible teacher that this passage does not teach what many traditional readers of the bible construe it to teach. It is not warning the individual believer to take care what choices he makes and what deeds he does, lest he lose out on various eternal rewards that belong to those who choose and act rightly. Such a reading of this passage does not even remotely fit the context. Paul is not addressing each and every follower of Jesus. He is addressing individuals who would presume to teach and proclaim the gospel and, by doing so, to grow and encourage a community of individuals who claim allegiance to Jesus and believe his gospel. In other words, Paul is addressing *teachers* of the gospel, not *believers* in the gospel. It is the *teacher* who must take care how he builds upon the foundation. It is the *teacher* who must take care to build with "gold, silver, and precious stones," not with "wood, hay, and straw." It is the *teacher* whose work will become evident on "the day." The "day" will reveal it, he says, for the "fire" connected with that day will burn up whatever that teacher has built on the foundation that is unable to withstand the fire. What will remain after that day is only whatever he has built on the foundation that can withstand the fire of that day.

It is the realization that Paul's exhortation here is directed at teachers that has caused me much soul-searching over the years. I am among those individuals who has presumed to teach others. Am I faithfully doing what Paul is exhorting me to do? Am I building with "gold, silver, and precious stones"? Am I building upon the foundation with something that will withstand the "fire" when "the day" comes? Or, am I actually building with "wood, hay, and straw"? That question has weighed on me. For it has never been clear to me what Paul means. What exactly would it look like to build with "gold, silver, and precious stones"? And what would it look like to build with "wood, hay, and straw"? How can I discern which of these I am doing when I don't know exactly what either of them is? That is the issue that has niggled at me.

The primary reason it is so difficult to know exactly what Paul is warning against stems from what appears, at first blush, to be a fundamental incoherence in the passage itself. The incoherence comes down to this:

- (1) On the one hand, surely there is one and only one way that a teacher can "be careful how he builds upon" the foundation. Surely he must take care that the content of his teaching is utterly and completely compatible with what is true. Undoubtedly Paul's exhortation to these purported teachers must be that they guard their own understanding from error, lies, and deception so that they do not pass on any false doctrines and ideas to those they teach. Since teaching the gospel is nothing more and nothing less than conveying an understanding of the gospel to others, what more could Paul expect from a teacher of that gospel than for him to make sure that it is a right and true understanding of the gospel that he is conveying to those he teaches.

(2) On the other hand, everything about Paul's analogy suggests that the building material with which a teacher is building on the foundation is analogous to a certain quality of person. The "work" that the teacher is building (as a "builder") is a structure composed of human individuals. The analogy he spells out in this passage is sandwiched between two explicit statements that identify the "building" or "structure" that Paul is concerned with as the community of Jesus-believers:

(i) "For we are God's fellow workers; **you** (the community of Jesus-believers in Corinth) **are God's field, God's building**" (3:9).

(ii) "Do you not know that **you** (the community of Jesus-believers in Corinth) **are a temple of God** and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (3:16).

So, if we take the metaphor at face value, the teacher building upon the foundation is building and growing a community of Jesus-believers. He must take care, Paul warns, that the community he builds (that is, the building or temple that he builds) is constituted of individuals who are "gold, silver, or precious stones," and is not constituted of individuals who are "wood, hay, or straw."

There is no way to be clear about what exactly Paul is warning teachers to do here without resolving this difficulty, without construing what he is saying in such a way that it is coherent. Which is Paul's concern? Is it the kind and sort of person that the teacher's teaching produces? Or, is it the nature and quality of the content of his teaching?

If it is the latter, then it is clear how I am to heed Paul's warning? At least, in principle, I understand how to pursue the truth and to avoid falsehood and error. But if it is the former—and there is good reason to think that the former is exactly what Paul means—then I am at a loss. How can I, a teacher, control what kind of person chooses to become a part of the community within which I teach? How can I ensure that everyone attracted to what I teach is "gold, silver, or precious stone"? Such a task seems impossible. Surely I cannot be expected to have any control over who responds to my teaching and how.

What's more, such a responsibility seems to clearly conflict with what Paul himself—and other portions of the N.T.—teach. Many passages either explicitly state, or clearly imply, that what and how an individual responds to the truth is out of the hands of the one who proclaims it. Each and every human being will ultimately do with the truth whatever he or she wants to do with it. He can suppress it, fight it, twist and distort it, or transform it into something that it is not—there is no end to what a human being might do with the truth presented to him.

How, then, can a teacher be responsible for what others do with his teaching? How does that make any sense? How can that possibly be compatible with what the Bible itself clearly teaches?

We appear to be faced with two problematic alternatives: (i) we either ignore how Paul himself clearly and explicitly presents his metaphor and construe his warning, quite simply, as an exhortation to teachers to make sure their doctrine reflects a right and true understanding of the gospel; or (ii) we take Paul's warning at face value—as a warning to build communities of high quality individuals—and assume that a teacher is fully and directly responsible for what quality of indi-

vidual incorporates himself into the community in which he teaches. In this brief paper, I want to sort out, once and for all, how to understand the nature of Paul's warning here.

A False Start?

It is tempting to understand the metaphor differently from how Paul explicitly presents it. He says that there is one and only one foundation that can be laid for this building—namely, the foundation of Jesus being the Messiah (3:11). A perfectly reasonable way to understand the role of a teacher is to understand him to have the task of constructing a system of beliefs where the foundational belief of that belief-system is that Jesus is the Messiah. The teacher's job, then, is to come to an understanding of the truth about God, his purposes, and his reality that is fully and completely compatible with the truth that Jesus is the Messiah. Or, to put it another way, his job is to spell out all the various implications of Jesus being the Messiah and thereby to construct a complete understanding of the Truth from God. Furthermore, his task is to pass that understanding on to others through his teaching. If a teacher constructs his system of beliefs out of beliefs that are fully consistent with and derived from the foundational belief that Jesus is the Messiah, then the structure (the belief-system) that he is building is being built with "gold, silver, and precious stones." But if he constructs it out of beliefs that are **not** fully consistent with and derived from the foundational belief that Jesus is the Messiah, then the structure (the belief-system) that he is building is being built with "wood, hay, and straw." The latter sort of structure (belief-system) will be "burned" on "the day" that is coming and he will not receive a "reward." But the former sort of structure (belief-system) will *not* be burned on "the day," and he *will* receive a reward (3:14–15).

This all makes perfectly good sense—up to a point. But there are two major problems with it:

- (1) As we have already seen, everything Paul says before and after this passage identifies the "structure" that the teacher is building with something composed of people (a community of Jesus-followers), not something that is composed of beliefs (a system of beliefs).
- (2) Under this interpretation, it is difficult to know what Paul would be intending as the analogue of the "fire" that burns down the structure. If the "structure" is a system of beliefs, what reality would correspond to the consuming fire? In what sense is there a day coming that will reveal the quality of a teacher's belief-system? And how, and in what sense, are beliefs subject to being destroyed? How are beliefs condemned or judged or consumed? It is clear how a teacher might be condemned or judged? And it is clear that he could be condemned and judged *because of* a false belief-system that he has constructed. But if that is what Paul means, then why would he frame his metaphor in terms that suggest that *his belief-system itself* might be burned up by the fire? That is a very odd picture to create for a teacher being judged for the truthfulness of his understanding. But it is not an odd picture at all for describing how the quality of the community which formed around a teacher's teaching might be revealed. Surely, at the final judgment (for example) it will become evident whether a community of Jesus-believers was a *quality* community or not. If everyone in such a community is condemned to ultimate destruction, then the structure built by the teacher in that community was "wood, hay, and straw," not "gold, silver, and precious stones." But if everyone in that community of believers is granted mercy and Life, then the structure built by the

teacher in that community was clearly one of “gold, silver, and precious stones.” Such a metaphor works! It appropriately includes a reference to a “day” that could “burn up” a teacher’s work. On the other hand, it is not at all obvious that a metaphor representing a system of false beliefs would reference a specific “day” that would reveal the falseness of its beliefs (when it “consumed” those beliefs as with fire). Many things in Paul’s teaching in various places encourage us to believe that human beings rejected by God will be destroyed (even burnt up). Nothing in Paul’s teaching encourages us to think that false beliefs that are rejected by God will be destroyed (or burnt up). False beliefs will be banished, disallowed, rejected. But they will not be destroyed on some particular day by “fire.” People will. So, the very nature of Paul’s metaphor here is more suggestive of a structure composed of people than a structure composed of beliefs and doctrines.

Therefore, everything about the metaphor and everything he says about it requires that we understand Paul to be identifying the structure built by the teacher to be a structure composed of human beings. And it is the human beings who constitute his structure that are either “gold, silver, and precious stones,” or “wood, hay, and straw.” How can we make sense out of that then? How can a teacher control the quality of the person who identifies with and joins himself to that community in which he teaches?

Interpreting 1 Corinthians 3

As it turns out, answering this last question is the key to understanding this passage. True—as we noted earlier—a teacher cannot control *how* another individual responds to what it is that he teaches him. However, a teacher does control *what* it is that the other person is responding to. That is, by controlling what it is that he is teaching, he is controlling the content to which the “audience” is responding. And that is the key. Because the content that the teacher delivers functions as a sort of filter. If the teacher teaches X, only individuals who are intrigued by and attracted to X are going to want to connect with others who are similarly attracted to X. In this way—and in this sense—*what* a teacher teaches determines *who* (and what sort of person) becomes a part of the community that he is building. Based on the assumption that a teacher can and does—to a significant degree, and in just this sense—determine the quality of person who identifies with the community in which he teaches, it makes sense, then, for Paul to issue the warning that he is issuing in this passage.

Notice, then, that—under this reading—Paul’s exhortation amounts to just what we would expect him to deliver to a teacher. Namely, he is exhorting anyone who would presume to teach the gospel to others to make sure that they get their understanding of the gospel right. It is an exhortation to make sure that they convey to others a right and accurate grasp of the gospel message. He warns them to avoid propagating a false, distorted, and mistaken understanding of the gospel. However, Paul’s underlying assumption is that the true, accurate, and complete gospel will resonate in the hearts and minds of authentic children of God who are destined for eternal Life. A false, distorted, and mistaken version of the gospel will resonate in the hearts and minds of children of the devil who are destined for destruction—that is, who are destined to be consumed by the “fire” in that “day” to come.

So, the way a teacher would heed Paul's exhortation here is just what we would expect: he must be on his guard against lies, myths, false values, and confused ideas. He must not allow them to insinuate themselves into what he teaches. He must be on guard to teach only true things that are completely consistent with the gospel. But it is not *this* that constitutes the "work" described in Paul's metaphor. The teacher's work is not to construct a pure, uncorrupted system of beliefs and ideas. His work is to incorporate other human beings into that set of people who have come to believe in Jesus. His role is to add to the people of God by persuading them to believe in Jesus. In other words, he is *not* called to be a theologian (merely for the sake of doing theology), he is called to be an evangelist who persuades others to believe and to attain salvation from destruction.

But how faithfully and accurately a teacher presents the gospel will directly determine how successful he will be at his true mission—that is, at how successful he will be at adding to the people of God. If he presents a false gospel that sinful, unbelieving people can embrace, then, while he will certainly *appear* to be growing the people of God, as a matter of fact, he is not. "The day" will reveal that he is not. For on that day, many (if not all) of those that he presumed to be children of God, destined for eternal life, will be condemned to destruction instead. Paul's earnest desire is that anyone who would presume to teach and proclaim the gospel might do so by presenting the *true* gospel message and by articulating it *accurately, fully, and coherently* so that the person most likely to be attracted to it is a person whom God has actually chosen for salvation and a person within whom the Spirit of God is at work, sanctifying him.

We have arrived, then, at the true nature of Paul's exhortation in this passage. We can paraphrase it this way:

But who and what is Apollos? And who and what am I, Paul? We are simply servants of God through whom you received the truth and came to believe it, even as God granted to each and every one of you the grace to do so. (3:5)

Now I planted the field. And Apollos watered the field. But it was God who caused the field to grow. So, neither the one who planted the field nor the one who watered the field is anything special. We were merely functioning as servants. It is God—the one who caused the field to grow—who is significant. (3:6-7)

Now the one who plants a field and the one who waters a field are on exactly the same page. They are united in their purpose and mission. They should have exactly the same understanding that they are seeking to impart. But each of them will receive his own individual reward that accords with the outcome of his labor. (3:8)

Now we—Apollos and I—are fellow workers for God. You, on the other hand, are God's field. Or, to use a different metaphor, God's building. (3:9)

In accord with the specific role that God gifted me to play, like a skilled and knowledgeable master builder I laid a foundation, and another has come along now to build upon it. But each and every person who, presuming to play the role of a builder, builds upon this foundation must take care how he does so. (3:10)

There is certainly no other possible foundation that can be laid down to define who is included in this structure that consists of the people of God except the one that I already laid down—that is, acceptance of the truth that Jesus is the Messiah. (3:11)

If any person assumes the role of builder—which is to say, teacher—what he builds upon this foundation that I have already laid will become evident. He might build upon the foundation that I laid by incorporating individuals of eternal value (that is, people who amount to gold, silver, or precious stones) into this community of believers who purport to be the people of God. Or, he might build upon the foundation that I laid by incorporating individuals who have no eternal value—people who are actually destined for destruction (that is, people who amount to wood, hay, or straw)—into this community of believers who purport to be the people of God. Which such a teacher does will become evident on the day of judgment that is to come at the end of time. For that day of judgment will reveal it. The day of judgment will reveal what sort of person each teacher has brought into and incorporated into the community of belief. If—through his teaching—he has incorporated into the community of belief individuals who are ultimately ungodly and unbelieving, then they will not survive God’s judgment. The “fire” of God’s wrath will destroy them on the day of judgment. But if he has incorporated into the community of belief individuals who are ultimately godly, righteous, and believing, then those individuals will survive the day of God’s judgment. They will survive the “fire” of God’s wrath on that day. Hence, the day of judgment will ultimately reveal the nature and quality of each teacher’s work. (3:12-13)

If the people that a teacher has brought into the community of belief survive the day of judgment, that teacher will receive a reward for his faithful labor. (3:14)

If the people that a teacher has brought into the community of belief do not survive the day of judgment—if, rather, they are destroyed by the fire of God’s wrath—then that teacher will lose out on any reward for his labor and effort. He himself may very well be saved from condemnation—that is, he may very well pass safely through the “fire” that destroys all the others whom his labor had appeared to incorporate into the people of God. But all of his work and effort could be destroyed on that day. (3:15)

You do realize, don't you—you who are bear the name of the people of God—that you are purposed to be a temple of the transcendent God, in the sense that the Spirit of God is purposed to reside within you through an inward, transforming work that he performs? (3:16)

For that reason, if anyone presumes to perform the role of a teacher of the gospel and destroys the people of God (who are purposed to be God's temple) by deliberately—out of a contempt for the truth—leading those who purport to follow him into falsehoods and lies, thereby filling that community of belief with unrighteous unbelievers, then God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are purposed to be. (3:17)

To put it succinctly, Paul is exhorting teachers—whose job it is to persuade individuals to believe the gospel and to incorporate themselves into the people of God—to take care to proclaim the true and accurate truth about Jesus—and all that it entails—so that the community of alleged believers that they build through their teaching will, in all likelihood, be a community of those who truly belong to the true people of God.¹

“Building on the Foundation”: What Is Meant

Now, having come to understand the nature of Paul's warning and how he is using his metaphor, one is struck by an important element of this metaphor. Paul makes a distinction between “the foundation” of the building and that which is “built upon the foundation.” The only possible foundation, he argues, is the Messiahship of Jesus. But what is the difference between “laying the foundation” and “building on the foundation”? Understanding this distinction is critical to understanding the exact nature of Paul's concern in this passage.

The distinction that Paul is making here comes into focus when we remember the context of Paul's life and thought. Paul travelled the world of his day proclaiming the gospel. What was the heart of his gospel? That Jesus was the Jewish Messiah sent into the world to accomplish God's purposes—most notably, to prepare the way for a human being to be rescued from death. Many people responded in belief to this proclamation by Paul and joined communities made up of others who so believed. However, not everyone in every such community saw eye to eye on each and every question that arose. The most famous controversy that developed revolved around the issue of whether a Gentile who had accepted the truth that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah should be expected to adopt Jewish practices and culture and abandon his distinctively Gentile way of life. There was sharp disagreement on this issue. Paul argued forcefully that a Gentile could remain thoroughly Gentile and still be a *bona fide* follower of Jesus who would inherit eternal Life. The so-called “Circumcision Party” was equally insistent that every follower of Jesus—whether Jew or Gentile—must adopt the distinctive practices of the Jews, for those practices were derived from the Law of Moses. A Gentile who did not do so was not a *bona fide* follower of Jesus and

1. What we have seen up to now makes it clear, I think, why James would say, “*Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a greater judgment.*” (James 3:1) It is a serious and weighty matter to presume to teach the truth to others. It is a life and death matter, an eternal life and death matter.

would not inherit eternal life. Here was a very dramatic example of two sets of contemporary Jesus-believers who taught very different views with regard to what a Gentile must do to be saved. This controversy was a classic example of just the sort of thing that Paul has in mind when he speaks of something that is "built upon" the foundation of Jesus, the Messiah.

It is one thing to confess that Jesus is the Messiah. It is quite another thing to understand the implications of that truth. Jesus is the Messiah! But, so what? What does Jesus being the Messiah entail with respect to what a Gentile needs to do to be saved? What does it entail about whether we can eat meat offered to idols? What does it entail about whether we can spend time with temple prostitutes? What does it entail about whether I can be relaxed about eating *kosher*? What does it entail about whether I need to pursue righteousness in the way I live my life? What does it entail about whether I can pay taxes to Caesar? So Jesus is the Messiah! What does that entail with regard to any specific, practical question that might arise? Not everyone who explicitly holds the belief that Jesus is the Messiah will agree on everything that this belief entails.

This, it would appear, is exactly what Paul has in mind in his metaphor of "building on the foundation" of Jesus, the Messiah. A teacher will and must begin with the proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah. If he does not, he is clearly and absolutely not teaching the truth of the gospel. But he cannot stop there. From there he must go on to teach what that means exactly. He must spell out what it entails with respect to how one should live and with respect to what other things one should believe and value. He must spell out all the implications of that truth for how one ought to live, how one ought to think, and how one ought to understand himself, God, and reality. A teacher has not finished teaching a person that Jesus is the Christ until he has finished making clear everything that that truth implies. To "build on the foundation" of Jesus Christ is to teach all the various implications of the fact that Jesus is the Christ.

The Circumcision Party taught a very different perspective from Paul with regard to the implications of Jesus being the Messiah. What attitude did Paul take toward this difference? Did he reason: we are all brothers; we all confess Jesus as the Messiah; therefore, we all need to simply agree to disagree on what are the implications of that fact and leave one another to follow Jesus in our own way? No, this was not Paul's reasoning. On the contrary, Paul held that the Circumcision Party showed signs that they did not believe the gospel at all. They may confess Jesus as the Messiah, but they do not understand what they are confessing. In a very real sense, they don't really believe that Jesus is the Messiah at all. (Either they are confessing Messiahship with respect to the wrong Jesus, or they are confessing the wrong thing with respect to the right Jesus.) If they did truly believe that Jesus was the Messiah, then they would understand the implications of that fact (including the fact that Jesus died the death he did on the cross). They would understand that Gentiles are saved by him and him alone, quite apart from imitating Jewish obedience to the requirements of the Covenant. But since they do not grasp these implications of Jesus' being the Messiah, it is questionable whether they actually do believe the truth that Jesus is the Messiah.

If we were to apply Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 3 to the Galatians controversy, what would Paul say? To the teacher who is advancing the perspective of the Circumcision Party, Paul would say something like this:

"Take care how you build on the foundational belief that Jesus is the Messiah. It is not enough to espouse it in words. You need to have a true and accurate understanding of the implications of this fact—that is, the fact that Jesus is the Messiah—and you need to teach those implications to others. You need to understand the significance of Jesus' death so clearly and accurately that you see how it obviates the need for Gentiles to live like Jews. And you need to teach that very thing to others. If you do not, then who are the people who will respond positively to your teaching? Are they people who truly understand and believe that Jesus is the Messiah? Are they authentic children of God? Or are they just a class of unbelieving religious persons who are attracted to a novel claim about a man named Jesus? If you do not grasp accurately the implications of Jesus' messiahship and teach those implications to others, then your teaching is a waste. Perhaps you personally have an authentic belief in Jesus. Perhaps you will attain salvation. But what about those whom you have taught? Is theirs an authentic belief in Jesus? Will they attain salvation? Perhaps it is not the truth about Jesus that attracts them. Perhaps, rather, they are attracted to the false and misleading doctrines that you are teaching them. Perhaps those false doctrines that you insist are a part of your belief in Jesus (but which, in fact, are utterly incompatible with the truth about Jesus)—perhaps it is those false doctrines that they are attracted to and eagerly embrace. Perhaps the truth about Jesus—if they should ever come to confront it—is something they would reject. If it is a false and distorted view of Jesus that they accept, then that acceptance of Jesus will not save them. Not all who name the name of Jesus will be saved. It is only those who are willing to embrace a full and accurate understanding of who Jesus is who will be saved."

It is not just to this controversy that Paul's warning applies. Early believers in Jesus confronted many and varied questions about how they should live, how they should think, what they should want, to what they should give priority, and many other such issues. For Paul, each and every question needed to be answered against the backdrop of what it meant that Jesus was the Messiah.

There were not different ways to think about each of these questions. There was one and only one way to think about it. A believer in Jesus must think about it the way his lord Jesus would teach him to think about it. That, and that alone, was the right way to think about it. And in terms of his metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3, how a teacher instructed these early believers with respect to each of these questions or controversies is what constituted "building on the foundation." To build on the foundation with "gold, silver, and precious stones" was to instruct people with respect to these various questions and controversies with answers that reflected a good, accurate, and true understanding of what it meant that Jesus was the Messiah. A teacher who taught what is true would tend to produce a community of Jesus-followers who were authentic children of God, destined for eternal life. In the end, such a teacher would be rewarded for his work. To build on the foundation with "wood, hay, and straw" was to instruct people with respect to these various questions and controversies with answers that did *not* reflect a good, accurate, and true understanding of what it meant that Jesus was the Messiah. A teacher who taught what is false—a distorted and misleading understanding of the implications of who Jesus was— would tend to produce a community of Jesus-followers who were *not* authentic children of God, who were des-

ted for destruction rather than life. In the end, such a teacher would *not* be rewarded for his work.²

Understanding the Relevance of 1 Corinthians 3 for Today

Where Do We Find the Truth?

Paul's warning to teachers is that they instruct people with respect to any questions and controversies that arise with answers that reflect a good, accurate, and true understanding of what it means that Jesus was the Messiah. Alternatively, it is that they instruct people with respect to any questions and controversies that arise with answers that reflect a good, accurate, and true understanding of the Truth that Jesus came into the world to reveal. How is a modern disciple to know what that Truth is?

The apostles—according to a promise Jesus made to them—were men who received a supernaturally clear and accurate understanding of the Truth that Jesus came into the world to reveal. From out of that clear and accurate understanding, the apostles instructed their contemporaries in the gospel of Jesus the Messiah and in the implications of that gospel for various questions and issues that their contemporaries confronted. The New Testament Scriptures are the record we have of the instruction these apostles gave to their contemporaries. In the language of our passage in 1 Corinthians 3, it is a record of how the apostles “laid the foundation of Jesus the Messiah” and how they “built on that foundation.”

In our passage, Paul writes that he—who was one of the supernaturally equipped apostles—laid the foundation as a “wise master builder.” Another—Apollos (who was not one of the supernaturally equipped apostles)—is building upon that foundation. Paul warns this “other” that he must take care how he builds upon it. (1 Corinthians 3:10) What must an individual take care to do if he presumes to take the role of this “other” person who is building on the foundation? He must thoroughly understand the teaching of the apostles as that is recorded in the New Testament; he must make sure his understanding is thoroughly informed by that apostolic teaching and only by that teaching; and he must take care to teach nothing except what is rooted in, derived from, and fully consistent with that apostolic teaching.

Over the course of history, other “Christians” have built on the foundation of Jesus the Messiah. Unfortunately, many of them have not heeded Paul's warning. They have instructed followers of Jesus to believe things that are not rooted in, derived from, and fully consistent with the teaching

2. What exactly is the “reward” that a teacher will either receive or forfeit depending upon how he “builds upon the foundation”? On the one hand, it is entirely possible that the faithful teacher's reward is the satisfaction that he will receive at having done a good job. In other words, the quality of his work could be its own reward. On the other hand, if we take our cues from Jesus' explicit teaching through some of his parables, it is likely that God will “reward” the faithful servant who builds upon the foundation well with specific responsibilities in the story of created reality that lies ahead. So, for example, in Matthew 25:23, Jesus has a master say to his slave in a parable, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Jesus' point seems to be that there exists an analogy between what this master says to his slave and what God will say to his faithful servants. I think it is highly likely that this is the “reward” that Paul has in mind here in 1 Corinthians 3.

of the New Testament (that is, with the apostolic teaching). And many of their faulty doctrines and beliefs have now been passed down to us under the guise of being part of the foundation itself. The modern Jesus-believer, therefore, must actually give heed to two warnings: (1) he must take care that what he takes to be the foundation of Jesus the Messiah *truly is* the authentic foundation laid down by the apostles; and (2) he must take care how he builds upon that foundation (just as Paul warned in 1 Corinthians 3).

When Christians uncritically embrace a creed, a doctrinal statement, a system of orthodox beliefs, a theological system, or any taken-for-granted understanding of what constitutes Christian faith and take that to be the unchallengeable foundation of their beliefs, they are making a huge mistake. They have failed to realize that what they are taking as the real and true foundation of their faith is, in truth, a faulty and illegitimate superstructure built on the foundation that Jesus is the Messiah.³

The only way a modern individual can presume to teach the gospel to others responsibly—and with integrity—is to understand the teaching of the New Testament so thoroughly and accurately that (1) he can discern the biblical and true from the false and illegitimate in the Christian tradition which he is taking as foundational, and (2) he can discern whether any proposed value or belief is consistent with the true and biblical worldview taught by Jesus.⁴

What Constitutes Belief in Jesus

Anyone who has the least semblance of biblical knowledge today understands that it is those who claim allegiance to Jesus who will be saved. But does everyone who names the name of Jesus *ipso facto* attain eternal life? Our tendency as modern Christians is to answer, “Yes, we Christians have all sorts of issues upon which we disagree—some doctrinal, some moral, some political—but we are all brothers in Jesus. And there is no other condition placed on salvation except for belief in Jesus Christ.”

But, as we can see here in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul’s view is more nuanced than that. He would agree that belief in Jesus, the Messiah, is the typical hallmark of the individual who will be

3. I am aware that by calling false doctrines that have been added to the doctrine that Jesus is the Messiah a superstructure is not to employ the same metaphor that Paul is employing in 1 Corinthians 3. But it is a closely parallel and related metaphor that is consistent with what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 3. Paul’s metaphor identifies the superstructure built on the foundation as the community that is formed by a teacher who teaches doctrines that are incompatible with the truth that Jesus is the Messiah. However, a teacher who builds a superstructure of false doctrines on the foundational truth that Jesus is the Messiah will, by so doing, be building a community of (likely) inauthentic believers on the foundation of their alleged belief that Jesus is the Messiah. It is this community of inauthentic believers that Paul calls the superstructure made of wood, hay, and straw.

4. It seems to me that a casual, second-hand understanding of the apostles’ teaching in the New Testament can never give one the sort of discernment of which I speak here. To be able to discern what is and is not consistent with the Truth that Jesus revealed requires a thorough, working knowledge of the teaching of the New Testament that has been personally appropriated through first-hand, active learning—even if that learning has come from some other teacher’s study, research, and understanding.

granted eternal Life. But Paul would make two important disclaimers: (i) it has to be the *right* Jesus, and (ii) it has to be the *right sort of belief* in this Jesus.

- Just any old Jesus will not do. It is not belief in the name ‘Jesus’ that qualifies us for salvation. It is belief in the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth—the one who was defeated by the enemies of God and crucified on a Roman cross. It is belief in *that* historical individual that qualifies us for eternal life. It does not do to believe in some other Jesus of our own imaginings.⁵ We believe in the historical Jesus of Nazareth for salvation or we receive no salvation at all.
- It is not enough to be willing to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth was (and is) the Messiah. To authentically believe that Jesus is the Messiah places certain obligations on us. If Jesus is the Messiah, then he is my master and lord. If Jesus is the Messiah, then it is he who has the words of eternal life and must be listened to. If Jesus is the Messiah, then I must make him my teacher. If Jesus is the Messiah, then he must be obeyed. If Jesus is the Messiah, then God’s reality just is what Jesus teaches us that it is. If Jesus is the Messiah, then God’s promises just are what Jesus says that they are. If Jesus is the Messiah, then God’s requirements are what Jesus says that they are. If Jesus is the Messiah, then the objective truth about everything is just what Jesus says it is, and none other. Belief that Jesus is the Messiah has far-reaching implications for my life, my beliefs, and my choices. To claim to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and then to ignore everything that he taught is to render my claim to believe a lie.

Clearly, then, we must not simplistically assume that anyone and everyone who names the name of Jesus is an authentic follower who will inherit eternal life. Confessing Jesus as the Messiah has innumerable implications for one’s life. True belief—true confession—will embrace each and every one of these implications for how one lives, thinks, believes, and speaks. True belief is much more demanding than mere casual consent to the proposition that Jesus is the Messiah. True belief is professed with the whole of one’s life and with everything than one does and says.⁶ We deceive ourselves, to our own destruction, if we think otherwise.

Belief in Jesus in Modern Western Civilization

What does belief in Jesus, the Messiah, mean in modern Western Civilization? Among other things, to believe that Jesus is the Messiah means that I will embrace the theistic, deterministic, teleological worldview that he embraced and not the atheistic, non-deterministic, non-teleological worldview of secular naturalism. To believe that Jesus is the Messiah means that I will embrace the existence of an objective truth in which it is incumbent on everyone, universally, to believe. I will reject the postmodern worldview that sees all truth claims as valid options lying

5. It is belief in the same Jesus the apostles believed in that indicates salvation. In 1 John, John warns his readers against the “idolatry” of conceiving Jesus to be a different person from the Jesus who actually rubbed shoulders with John and his fellow-disciples. It is idolatry to believe in a different Jesus from the Jesus that they proclaimed as Messiah. He writes, “*This one (=Jesus) is the true God and Life in the final age. Precious offspring, be on your guard against idols.*” (1 John 5:20b–21)

6. This is why Jesus can teach, “*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*” (Matthew 7:13–14)

before me. To believe that Jesus is the Messiah means that I will accept and live in the light of those moral values and moral principles that Jesus embraced and will reject the incoherent moral principles of modern culture that are rooted in the rejection of God and tolerance toward everything else. To believe that Jesus is the Messiah means that I will believe everything that God has promised and predicted through his prophets of old. I will feel no freedom to doubt them or scorn them. To believe that Jesus is the Messiah means that I will accept the actual historicity of the biblical accounts of God's interaction with his creation, I will not treat those accounts as the mere literary creations of ingenious religious thinkers.

To believe that Jesus is the Messiah will put me in radical opposition to everything that modern culture believes and values. The "world" of modern culture is an enemy of the teaching of Jesus. If Jesus is the Messiah, I must resist the mind-shaping winds of modern culture and submit to the mind-shaping instruction of Jesus himself.⁷ I must love what Jesus teaches me to love, not what modern culture tells me to love. I must fear what Jesus says to fear, not what modern culture tells me to fear. I must place my hope in that in which Jesus teaches me to place my hope, not where modern culture tells me to place my hope.

Further Remark With Regard To Building on the Foundation

An additional observation needs to be made about Paul's concept of "building on the foundation." We have seen that "building on the foundation of Jesus Christ" consists of instructing others with respect to specific, practical implications of being a Jesus-follower. "In order to follow Jesus, you need to do X." "In order to follow Jesus, you need to think this way about Y." "In order to follow Jesus, you need to believe Z about W." These are the sorts of statements that enter into a teacher's "building upon the foundation." Whenever I, as a teacher, explicitly instruct others about how they ought to live or think in order to be disciples of Jesus, I am "building upon the foundation." I can be instructing them in accord with truth and wisdom, or I can be instructing them in accord with falsehood and folly. But either way, I am building upon the foundation of their belief that Jesus is the Messiah. And, I am thereby selecting who will be "built into" the community of believers I am building through my teaching.

But there is a second, more subtle way to convey a truth (or a falsehood) to those whom I presume to teach. To teach something to a person, I do not necessarily have to explicitly articulate a belief and instruct another in it. Often I convey a belief (or doctrine) simply by living and behaving in a manner consistent with that belief.

Consider the following example: my belief that Jesus is the Messiah is an *objectively true* belief. One way to convey this truth (the fact that Jesus' Messiahship is *objectively true*) to another is to clearly and explicitly articulate it. When I teach others, I simply make it explicit that the Messiahship of Jesus is an objectively true reality. But another way to convey that truth to another

7. John describes this as a "victory over the world" when he writes, "Now his instructions are not too difficult to keep, because every child who is fathered by God has victory over the world. And this is the victory that is victorious over the world: our belief. Who is the one who is victorious over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:3b-5:5)

er is to have everything I do, say, feel, love, and value be affected by the fact of Jesus' Messiahship. So, if I choose to die for my conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, I have clearly conveyed my understanding that the Messiahship of Jesus is an objective reality. I clearly believe that "Jesus is the Christ" is an objective truth. For if I did not believe that, why would I die for it?

Arguably, this latter way of conveying a truth is the more important of the two. It speaks louder than the first. If a person teaches that X is true but he does not live, choose, and act as if X is true, does he really believe it? And if he, the teacher, does not really believe it, is he truly recommending that I, the student, believe it. As a teacher, I am never really teaching X to another unless I am authentically embracing X myself. No student can (or should) take my explicit teaching seriously unless I am myself giving heed to that which I teach.

This has a very important implication. It is entirely possible for a teacher to explicitly articulate something that is true but, at the same time, to actually *teach and convey* what is false. As I would understand the teaching of the Circumcision Party, they explicitly taught that Jesus' (the Messiah's) death on the cross was the basis for divine mercy. But while they explicitly taught as much, they clearly—in Paul's estimation—did not actually believe it. For they did not act like they believed it. To the extent that they responded censoriously, self-righteously, with intimidation, and without mercy toward any Jesus-follower who did not keep the Law, they were betraying the fact that they did not actually believe that a human being will be accepted by God on the basis of Jesus' death and intercession alone. Accordingly, Paul accuses them of "teaching another gospel." It is not that they explicitly articulated and taught an alternative version of the "gospel." They did not. But their real, actual, working beliefs were contrary to the gospel that Paul proclaimed. And those real, actual, working beliefs were the content that they were actually conveying to others. It was their real, actual, working beliefs that affected others, influencing the mindset and behavior of others. The influential implicit beliefs of these men are what Paul called "another gospel."⁸

An Important Modern Example of What Paul Is Warning Against

Finally, let's consider a modern example of the sort of thing Paul is warning teachers against. In our postmodern world, an entirely different concept of "truth" has emerged. As incoherent and confused as it is, a postmodern individual could claim that Jesus' Messiahship is an objective truth but then—at the same time—maintain that "not everyone has to believe it." It makes absolutely no sense, of course, to claim that something is objectively true while failing to recognize that it is universally binding. It is self-contradictory to say that something is objectively true for me while not being objectively true for you. But that is the world we live in. The modern teacher of the gospel, therefore, needs to take great care what it is that he is conveying to those he is teaching. He must not say that biblical faith is objectively true with his mouth while denying that it is objectively true with his attitudes and interactions with others. If I tell my students that biblical faith is objectively true while, at the same time, exuding the postmodern attitude that they, of course, don't have to believe it, I have effectively *denied* the objectivity of biblical truth. I have

8. Galatians 1:6.

built on the foundation of Jesus Christ by conveying to those I teach the wood-hay-and-straw-producing doctrine of the non-objectivity of biblical truth.

Any teacher of the gospel who believes in the objective reality of the truth of the gospel will convey *a sense of urgency* with regard to it:

"Jesus is the Christ. You need to face into it. It is a matter of life and death. Your eternal destiny hinges on what you do with this fact. No one can make you believe it. But you are a fool if you disregard it. You are ensuring your destruction. Please don't be a fool."

Such an attitude is a far cry from the no-urgency attitude and mindset of the postmodern:

"Jesus is the Christ. People like me believe that that is the objective truth. Now you don't have to believe it of course. It is equally valid not to believe it. But I, and others like me, do believe it. It is our truth."

A bible teacher would never have to actually say any of these things to communicate them. If the person I am teaching experiences no challenge, no sense of urgency, no appeal from me to "please confront this truth," then—given the world we live in—they will automatically assume that Jesus being the Christ places no significant claim on them, that it is just one of many options for what a person might believe. And, as a consequence, I will have presented a not-objectively-true gospel to them—a gospel that Jesus never taught, that Paul never believed, and that qualifies no one whatsoever for salvation. If what I teach other believers in Jesus is that the truth we believe is just one more option among others, then I have led them astray. I am likely building on the foundation with wood, hay, and straw.

Concluding Remarks

The 1 Corinthians passage I have focused on in this paper is a warning from Paul to teachers. But what Paul says to teachers here has great significance for all of us. It is, at the same time, a warning to each and every individual who would purport to be a follower of Jesus.

Hopefully, this paper has made it clear that not everyone who names the name of Jesus is an authentic child of God. Not every believer in Jesus is going to be rescued from death and inherit life in the age to come. Just because a person expresses allegiance to Jesus does not mean that he embraces the Truth. But the child of God is marked by the fact that he embraces the Truth that is centered in Jesus, not by the mere fact that he names the name of Jesus.

Not every belief that a Jesus-believer might hold is consistent with and compatible with the Truth. Jesus-believers—for a variety of reasons—come to embrace false and illegitimate beliefs. Some of those false beliefs can be relatively innocuous and inconsequential. But sometimes those false and illegitimate beliefs are indicative of a rejection of the Truth itself. They betray the fact that the Jesus being followed is an "idol," not the real Jesus of objective truth and reality.

Therefore, contrary to common sentiment, the believer is not free to believe whatever he wants to believe so long as he believes in Jesus. It is not uncommon, among modern Christians, to think that any and every doctrinal difference among Jesus-believers is of no consequence, simply a

matter of personal preference.⁹ But this could not be further from the truth. With respect to each and every issue that one might confront, there is but one right and true perspective. There is one and only one mindset that is consistent with and is derived from the Truth. Of all the options before me, only one set of values is consistent with the Truth that is found in Jesus. Only one set of beliefs is consistent with that Truth. In other words, with respect to each and every controversy that we face (whether it is doctrinal, religious, or social-political), there is one and only one right answer.¹⁰ And my belief in Jesus does, in truth, mark me as an authentic child of God only to the extent that it includes a belief in that one right answer to the issue in question.¹¹

The contrary perspective is misleading and destructive. If we adopt the mindset that, so long as we believe in Jesus, we are welcome to adopt whatever other beliefs are interesting and attractive to us, we curtail the sort of self-examination that believers need to practice. Rather, we encourage the sort of self-deception wherein people think, "Because I name the name of Jesus, I'm okay." With this mindset, Jesus-followers are not encouraged to ask themselves the further question, "Am I acting, speaking, thinking, and believing in a manner that is compatible with the Truth?" And when a community is not encouraged to entertain that question, belief becomes easy. I can reject anything that challenges me, places demands on me, criticizes me, or makes me uncomfortable in any way. I can entertain and embrace beliefs that are utterly incompatible with the truth that is found in Jesus. But who is it who would embrace beliefs that are incompatible with the truth that is found in Jesus? An illegitimate child, a bastard son; one who does not authentically and truly believe in the truth that is found in Jesus; one whose destiny is destruction rather than Life.

Not infrequently, social-cultural-political issues are among those beliefs that reveal the state of our relationship to Jesus. In Jesus' own time, both he and Paul weighed in on a political controversy of their time: is it consistent with obedience to and respect for God to pay taxes to Caesar? There was but one right perspective to take toward that question. Both Jesus and Paul advocated

9. It is not uncommon today to think, for example, that whether or not you believe in the inerrancy of the Bible is of no more consequence than whether you prefer raisin bran or shredded wheat for breakfast. Similarly, whether or not you believe in the sacraments is of no more consequence than whether you root for the Seahawks of the Raiders.

10. It is true that the "one right answer" might be that more than one viewpoint on the controversy is compatible with the Truth. However, when that is the case, then the perspective that more than one viewpoint can be valid is *the one right answer*. In that case it would be wrong to suggest that genuine belief in Jesus must embrace one option over the others; it would be to fail to grasp the very real implications of the Truth that Jesus revealed to us and would, therefore, be a false and invalid perspective. Note that there is a significant difference between the following: (1) I can suggest that more than one viewpoint or perspective is valid because I have the wisdom and understanding that leads me to understand how and why more than one option is valid; or (2) I can suggest that more than one viewpoint or perspective is valid because I believe, *a priori*, that there is no right perspective on any given controversy. The truth that is found in Jesus may involve the former; it will never involve the latter.

11. Failure to believe and embrace that "one right answer" to the issue in question does not necessarily mean that I am NOT an authentic believer. It depends upon whether my failure to believe that "one right answer" is due to ignorance or hardened rebellion against what is true. If it is ultimately attributable to ignorance, then it does not indicate unbelief. But if it is ultimately attributable to my spiritual state of rebellion against righteousness and truth, then it bespeaks the fact that I am not a child of God.

for that one perspective.¹² Neither Jesus nor Paul took the position that “there are different answers that a person can give to that question; and, so long as you are seeking to honor God, it is of no consequence which way you answer it.”¹³

More pointedly, on a whole spectrum of social-political issues that are controverted among American Christians today, there is but one right viewpoint. An authentic follower of Jesus will be concerned to conform his thinking to that one right viewpoint on each issue. If I dismiss or reject the right viewpoint on any one of the controversial issues abroad, I cannot make a valid claim to follow Jesus. The fact that I can be attracted to and embrace a false and illegitimate social-political belief or value calls into question the authenticity of my claim to be one of Jesus’ followers.¹⁴ Either socialism is compatible with the Truth that Jesus revealed, taught, and represented, or it is not. There is one right answer to that question.¹⁵ Either gay marriage is compatible with what Jesus taught, or it is not. There is one right answer. If it is compatible, then my belief in Jesus requires that I support gay marriage; if it is not, then my belief in Jesus requires that I denounce it. There is no middle ground.¹⁶ Either support for the modern state of Israel is com-

12. It is most thoroughly articulated by Paul in Romans 13. Paul argues that, because God, in his sovereignty, controls all of history, it cannot possibly be that case that one is being disrespectful to God when he honors the ruler that God himself has put in place. So, yes, go ahead and pay taxes to Caesar. God will not think that you are slighting him to do so. Jesus gives the same answer—albeit more cryptically: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s; give to God what is God’s. So, yes, you can pay your taxes.” Both Jesus and Paul—I would argue—would consider the defiant, non-compliant attitude of the Zealots to be a false, foolish, unwise, and ill-informed attitude and perspective.

13. Paul would undoubtedly argue that a *bona fide* follower of Jesus might, out of ignorance and confusion, believe that he dare not pay taxes to Caesar. Such a belief—in and of itself—would not disqualify him from being a *bona fide* follower of Jesus. But, while it may not necessarily disqualify him as a child of God, it is a false, confused, wrong-headed belief. Paul would never validate the belief itself as valid, even when he thought that the person who held it had a good heart and an authentic faith. Note that in Romans 14, while Paul exhorts the one whose faith is strong not to hold in contempt the brother whose faith is weak, Paul gives no indication at all that he thinks the brother whose faith is “weak” has a valid perspective. Paul calls it “weak” precisely because he believes it is *not* a valid perspective. So, Paul does teach mercy, patience, and tolerance toward those who have faulty beliefs when their commitment to Jesus is real and authentic. But Paul never teaches that any and every belief is valid and acceptable if your commitment to Jesus is real and authentic.

14. Certainly a genuine follower of Jesus can be deceived into embracing a false or unwise social-political view by lies, myths, and undetected falsehoods of various kinds. If we are beginning from a set of “facts” that are not true, we can quite readily come to false and foolish political beliefs. Therefore, not every false or foolish political belief that I might hold entails that my relationship to Jesus is inauthentic. It is only when we hold a false or foolish political belief because we are attracted to it (as evidenced, for example, by the fact that *I will allow no contrary facts or evidence to dislodge me from my belief*) that it calls into question the genuineness of my belief in Jesus. While authentic faith may be deceived by lies and falsehoods, it can never prefer folly to wisdom.

15. And it is not as if supporting or accepting socialism is akin to liking folk music or jazz, simply a matter of taste. How I look at socialism is a matter of moral judgment, not a matter of personal preference. Hence, it has significant ramifications for the nature of my relationship to Jesus.

16. I want to be clear here about what I am and am not saying. My claim here is that if gay marriage is not compatible with what Jesus teaches, then my belief in Jesus requires that I “denounce” it—that is, that I adjust my thinking with respect to gay marriage to conform to what Jesus thinks. I am not saying that if gay marriage is not compatible with what Jesus teaches, then my belief in Jesus requires that I actively do what I can—politically and otherwise—to rid our culture of gay marriage. That would be a strictly “political” claim. I am not making a political

patible with what Jesus taught, is not compatible with what Jesus taught, or is not determined one way or the other by what Jesus taught. There is one and only one perspective on this question that is compatible with a full understanding of God's truth. A follower of Jesus will want to know and understand what that one right perspective is.

Paul's exhortation to teachers, therefore, is also an exhortation to each one of us who claim to believe. We must guard ourselves against false doctrines, godless values, and foolish perspectives—of all sorts, regardless of what category they might fall under. We must guard ourselves against an inadequate and incomplete understanding of the Truth. Only then can we ensure that we do not constitute that part of the "believing" community that is actually wood, hay, and straw rather than gold, silver, and precious stones.

claim. I am making a claim about the demands of "faith." I am speaking with respect to what the nature of belief must be if it is to qualify a person for salvation. My concern in this paper is not to save American culture and civilization (regardless of how valuable that might be). My concern in this paper is to save the eternal destiny of individual human beings. Eternal Life beyond the grave is not a gift given to someone who merely names the name of Jesus. It is given only to authentic, *bona fide* followers of Jesus. And to be an authentic, *bona fide* follower of Jesus requires that one heed what Jesus teaches and genuinely "learn" from him, adjusting one's own understanding to conform to that which Jesus taught. Anyone who insists that the claim I am making here is political in nature fails to understand authentic belief in Jesus—most likely because he has embraced the counterfeit postmodern version of Christianity that is abroad today.