

A NEW LOOK AT 1 CORINTHIANS 3:12- "GOLD, SILVER, PRECIOUS STONES"¹

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The six materials in 1 Cor 3:12 are arranged to denote a descending scale by moving from a unit of three good qualities to a unit of three bad ones. The verse uses pictures to represent what Paul calls "work" in vv 13 and 14. Paul's main point is to encourage building with quality materials that will meet with God's approval and receive eternal reward. Interpreters sometimes restrict the meaning of the symbols either to doctrine, to people, to activity, or to character. The conclusion is that Paul in the symbols combines several things that lead to Christ's good pleasure and a believer's reward. These are sound doctrine, activity, motives and character in Christian service.

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Paul's context that leads into and away from the picture of "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw" is filled with spiritual qualities. He says much to distinguish the wisdom of God from the wisdom of the world. He sees a vast difference between the mind-set of the "natural man" and the mind of believers, "the mind of Christ."² He distinguishes sharply between the "spiritual" person and the "carnal."³

¹This essay was originally presented at the Thirty-seventh Annual Meeting of The Evangelical Theological Society in La Mirada, CA, in November 1985 and has been updated for incorporation in this issue of *The Master's Seminary Journal*.

²1 Cor 2:16. English translations are from the New American Standard Bible (La Habra, CA: Foundation, 1971) and from the King James Version.

³Either of two main interpretations fit the view that becomes evident in this study on 1 Cor 3:12. Some see the τέλειοι (*teleioi*, "mature") (2:6) as the saved who have grown to spiritual maturity (so S. Toussaint, "The Spiritual Man," *BSac* 125 [1968] 139-46; C. C. Ryrie, "What is Spirituality?," *BSac* 126 [1969] 204-13). A second view is that *teleioi* and πνευματικοί (*pneumatikoi*, "spiritual") are all the saved (so P. J. Du Plessis, *Teleios, The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* [Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1959]). All the saved are perfect and spiritual ideally and provisionally in view of "the plenitude of salvation . . . and the consummate

Then, in 3:5-8a, he focuses on the great common privilege that all those who serve God share. They, in common, are all totally dependent on the grace of God for anything of value that they accomplish. Paul is quick to qualify this lest any should leap to an erroneous conclusion that he is teaching that God sees no differences in those who serve Him. Those who *depend* on the grace of God and ascribe the glory to Him are individually *distinct*. God takes notice of the difference in their individual labor and also will make legitimate distinction in the particular reward that He deems suitable for each worker (3:8b).

Having made this point, Paul then portrays the church under two figures: "God's tillage" and "God's building."⁴ His "building" picture blends with that of the "temple" in vv 16-17.⁵ The "building" also prepares for the figure of Christ as the "foundation" (vv 10, 11). We read Paul's caution to any worker who builds upon that foundation: let him build carefully! Paul, who refers so often to himself as an example,⁶ is an example here. He himself built "as a wise [skilled] architect,"⁷ wise, that is, in the wisdom of God which he mentions in

bounty of redemptive gifts bestowed . . ." (184).

⁴The two metaphors are also combined in God's work with Israel in the OT (Jer 1:10; 18:9; 24:6; 31:28; 45:4; Ezek 36:9, 10). Bertil Gärtner cites Qumran references where "plantation" occurs with "house" and "temple" (*The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament* [Cambridge: U. P., 1965] 27-29). For the two figures in Philo, Hellenism and Gnosticism, cf. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, (1st ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 75, nn. 61-63.

⁵So F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (London: Oliphants, 1971) 44-45: in vv 16-17 the building of v 9 is "more closely defined as a sanctuary . . . for God to inhabit." Gärtner equates "building" and "temple," since "foundation" (v 11) and "building" (v 9) make it "perfectly justifiable to regard these more general expressions in the context of temple symbolism" (pp. 57 f.). Cf. also Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 140-41.

⁶Cf. 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:9.

⁷Ἀρχιτέκτων (*Architektōn*, "architect") is used only here in the NT. Ancient texts are not highly definitive as to the duties it denoted. In 2 Macc 2:29 an architect has comprehensive responsibility over all particulars of a building work. This is in contrast to an architect who must be concerned only with one phase of work such as adorning a building. Isa 3:3 (LXX) links the ἀρχιτέκτων (*architektōn*, "architect") with positions requiring expertise. Sirach 38:27

chapters 1-4. He was careful to build consistently with the standard, God's grace. He became a good model of dependence on that grace that others should imitate.

Paul is concerned that others build in a way that is consistent with the spiritual quality he has modeled. Any work they do is to be done in a manner that corresponds in nature to the foundation, Christ, and to the standard set by Paul. To be sure, work on both the foundation and the superstructure must be imbued with God's wisdom and grace. It needs quality imparted by the Holy Spirit through the person who works; it must be done by a person who is "spiritual," a worker who has "the mind of Christ" (2:15, 16).

I. THE MATERIALS OF VERSE 12

Now Paul comes to our verse. A person who works on the foundation may build with "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw. . . ." The list of six words joined without connectives is a construction known as asyndeton.⁸ We probably register the effect that Paul intends if we understand that the words represent a descending scale.⁹ The first three are pictures of a broad category of qualities that

distinguishes him from a *τέκτων* (*tekton*, "artisan"). Paul intends a wider meaning than today's "architect" who is only a designer of blueprints. For Paul has personally done the construction work, "laid the foundation." In that he combines the word with *σόφος* (*sophos*, "wise, skilled"), his emphasis is on being an "expert" or "highly qualified workman." Cf. examples where the term denoted a person of special expertise in J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 82.

⁸Asyndeton also occurs in 1 Cor 13:4-7, which relates to the excellencies of love, with one connective, *δέ* (*de*, "but"), and in Gal 5:22-23 which lists the fruit of the Spirit, among other instances. As A. T. Robertson says, connectives may be left out "as a result of rapidity of thought as the words rush forth, or they may be consciously avoided for rhetorical effect" (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934) 427, 1177-78). Asyndeton in 1 Cor 3:12 is probably intended for rhetorical effect (cf. n. 8).

⁹F. Blass and A. Debrunner suggest that the list "is to be read with animation emphasizing the studied scale of descending value" (*A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early-Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961] 421, par. 460, (3); cf. also C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* [London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968] 88). That Paul

are good. The last three combine as a broad category that is bad, in contrast to the first. These two categories reappear in Paul's direct contrast of 2 Cor 5:10 when he refers to all believers being manifest before the judgment seat of Christ. There, every one will receive the things done in his body, things "good or bad." As 1 Cor 3:13-15 clarifies, "gold, silver, precious stones" are symbols representing *good* materials. On the other hand, the "wood, hay, straw" are pictures of work that is bad in the sense of worthless, *φάυλος* (*phaulos*, "bad") as 2 Cor 5:10 describes it.¹⁰

II. IDENTIFICATION OF THE MATERIALS WITH THE "WORK"

The six materials of v 12 are symbols for the same thing that is called "work" in vv 13 and 14. This is logical for two reasons.

(1) Both the materials and the "work" are tested by "fire." In

intended a word-by-word diminuendo does not necessarily follow from his order of listing the symbols. Silver sometimes is put before gold (Acts 3:6; 20:33; 1 Pet 1:18), sometimes after it (Acts 17:29; 2 Tim 2:20; Jas 5:3; Rev 9:20; 18:12).

¹⁰Some see "wood, hay, straw" as only inferior work, not bad work. William Barclay, in *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956) 36, refers them not to building up "wrong things" but "inadequate things . . . weak and watered down; a one-sided thing which has stressed some things too much and others too little . . . out of balance; a warped thing. . . ." The two categories of 1 Cor 3 could still correspond with the two in 2 Cor 5:10, the "good or bad" (*ἀγαθόν* [*agathon*] or *φάυλον* [*phaulon*]). *Φάυλος* (*Phaulos*) means "worthless," but in this context not a third category, not really good, not really bad. It is rather the opposite of *ἀγαθόν* (*agathon*, "good"), and so it is bad, sinful. Reasons that suggest this are: (1) Forms of *phaulos* do mean "worthless," but often in a both/and way, worthless in the sense of bad or bad in the sense of worthless. In its five other uses in the NT, *phaulos* refers to evil, as E. Achilles says ("*phaulos*," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [ed. Colin Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975] I, 564; also John A. Sproule, "'Judgment Seat,' or 'Awards Podium'?", *Spire*, Grace Theological Seminary, 13 [1984] 3). The bad works of the unsaved are *phaulos* (John 3:20). The evil deeds of the unsaved are contrasted with the good (*phaulos/agathos*, John 5:29). Jacob and Esau before birth had not committed good (*agathon*) or evil (*phaulon*) in Rom 9:11. (2) The OT (LXX) has *phauloi* as opposite to *δίκαιοι* (*dikaioi*, "righteous") (Job 9:23), and *phaulē* for an evil woman (Prov 5:2). (3) Is it legitimate to assume a meaning that necessitates three categories in 1 Cor 3:12-15 and 2 Cor 5:10 when both texts list *two* units and can be explained reasonably with *two*? (4) The previous context of 1 Cor 3:12-15 has a contrast in 3:1-4 between attitudes that are spiritual and those that are carnal.

this case "fire" is a symbol for Christ's probing, all-searching judgment that scrutinizes every aspect.¹¹ Many Roman Catholics have interpreted the "fire" to picture a purging fire that the worker must encounter in an alleged purgatory.¹² Some Catholics have not followed this view.¹³ However they differ, it is not convincing that purgatory is the idea Paul intends in his picture of fire.¹⁴ The thought is that of the worker's being tested to be approved, not punished to be improved. And the thought of direct *punishment* to the saved person does not appear to be

¹¹Christ's judgment will have to be more probing than fire if all whom He judges are to "receive the things done in their bodies" (2 Cor 5:10). Paul's idea is similar to that in Rev 1:14 and 2:23 where Christ's eyes are like a flame of fire and He "searches the minds and hearts."

¹²Origen sees 1 Cor 3:15 as the biblical *locus classicus* for purgatory (Contra Celsum 5:15). Favoring purgatory here, cf. E. Lussier, "The Biblical Doctrine on Purgatory," *American Ecclesiastical Review*, CXLII (1960) 225-33, esp. 232. Lussier's other verses for purgatory are reasonably explained in other ways: Isa 1:25; 6:7; Zech 13:9; Matt 3:2-3, 11; Sir 2:5. Other texts often cited for purgatory, also adequately interpreted in other ways, are such as 2 Macc 12:43-45, Matt 12:32, and 1 Tim 1:18.

¹³Johannes Gnllka surveys 3:10-15 at length in the Eastern and Western churches. He thinks 3:15 does not teach purgatory. The fire is God's glory when He comes for the last judgment. Gnllka's denial here does not mean that he sees no evidence *anywhere* for purgatory (*Ist I Kor 3, 10-15 ein Schriftzeugnis für das Fegefeuer?* [Dusseldorf: M. Tritsch, 1955], 128).

¹⁴Certain factors are against purgatory in 1 Cor 3:15. (1) The purpose of the "fire" is not to *purge* but to *test* for reward. The saved were already cleansed through Christ's blood. The "fire" that tests the "work" is not aimed at "improving the character" (Norman Hillyer, "I Corinthians," *New Bible Commentary Revised* [London: IVP, 1970] 1056). (2) No punishment is in view. Christ bore all of our punishment (Rom 8:1). His judgment of the saved is to reward for good and diminish reward, not condemn, for bad. "Fire" here affects *all* who do work on the true foundation; it is not exclusively for work that is worthless. (4) The text does not teach explicitly or implicitly a remission of sins at this testing. It does not deal with changing a person's lot but revealing it (cf. v 13). There is no suggestion of a later improvement after death in a purgatorial fire. (5) J. F. X. Cevetello, arguing that 1 Cor 3:15 may mean purgatory "at least indirectly," makes a concession: "In the final analysis, the Catholic doctrine on purgatory is based on tradition, not Sacred Scripture" ("Purgatory," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* [15 vols.; New York, 1967] XI, 1034). This is significant, though, as John Townsend says, *most* Roman Catholic scholars see purgatory in 3:15 "in one form or another" ("I Corinthians 3:15 and the School of Shammai," *Harvard Theological Review*, LXI [1968] 500).

the point.

(2) The materials are symbols that equate with "work" because they have the same result. Whether the description is "gold . . . straw" or "work," they "remain" (v 14) or "burn up" (v 15). Although "work" that a man has built on Christ the foundation may "burn," Paul makes it very clear that "he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire" (v 15). The purpose of the test is to give an *examination* of the worker as to the nature of his "work," not a *condemnation* of the worker as to his person. His salvation is secure, but the man will experience some kind of "loss."¹⁵ It is reasonable to understand that loss, in a context dealing with work and its reward, as a loss with respect to reward. The worker loses (is reduced, diminished in some fitting degree) in reference

¹⁵Ζημιόω (*Zēmioō*) means "to set someone in a disadvantageous position." The disadvantage was "loss," opposed to κέρδος (*kerdos*, "gain") or "damage," synonymous with βλάβη (*blabē*, "harm"), as in loss of money or goods (A. Stumpff, "ζημία (*zēmia*), *zēmioō*," *TDNT*, ed. G. Kittel, II [1964] 888-92; W. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Cambridge: University Press, 1960] 339). Context may help decide the idea. The meaning can be "ruin," as by homosexuality (Stumpff, "*zēmia*" 889) or "punishment." The latter sense is possible in Prov 22:3[LXX], "fools [the naive] . . . are punished"; cf. also 27:12; or 19:19, "A malicious man [man of great anger] shall be severely punished" or else "bear the penalty, be fined," which is a loss to him. Exod 21:22 has a man being punished by being fined, penalized, not destroyed as a person. Matt 16:26 refers to a man's losing his soul, a statement with *zēmioō*, just before referring to the Son of Man rewarding every man according to his works (v 27). The works are not to merit salvation, but manifest the reality of it. Loss of special reward but not salvation is in view in 1 Cor 3:15, but loss of the soul (eternal damnation) in Matthew. Luke 9:25 combines two words for loss: "if he gains the whole world but loses (ἀπόλεσας [*apolesas*]) himself or suffers loss (ζημιωθεῖς [*zēmiōtheis*])." Apparently *zēmioō* in such a connection can be another term for the loss of eternal salvation. Paul's use of *zēmioō* in two other texts besides 1 Cor 3:15 does not refer to eternal punishment or forfeiture of the soul. In 2 Cor 7:9, Paul rejoiced that the Corinthians did not "suffer loss" by some adverse reaction to his letter (v 8). He probably meant a setback in their spiritual experience. And in Phil 3:8, Paul had "suffered loss" in all things for the sake of Christ and salvation in Him, that is, his sense of the *value* (Stumpff, "*zēmia*" 890) of things on which he might rely for God's acceptance (vv 5, 6). The word is also used for loss (diminishing) of cargo and tackle from a ship but not the loss of people's lives (Acts 27:10, 21). Cf. Jay Shanor, who cites 4th-century-B.C. Greek building contracts where ζημιόω (*zēmioō*) means "to fine" for not completing a job or for taking too long ("Paul as Master Builder: Construction Terms in First Corinthians," *New Testament Studies* 34 [1988] 469-71).

to the measure of potential reward he might have received for the burned "work" had Christ appraised it as work that "remains."¹⁶

As in v 8, God distinguishes each servant in the varying capacity of eternal reward that He judges equitable to that servant's particular degree of faithfulness (cf. 4:2). This is consistent with Jesus' teaching about degrees (capacities, positions, gradations, stations, roles) of reward. In His Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:12-27) it is clear when one servant receives reward in terms of a capacity over ten cities and another over five cities.

III. THE MAIN POINT IN THE MATERIALS OR "WORK"

Gold, silver and precious stones appear often in the OT. They are in different combinations, either all or two of them being together, or one of the three occurring alone. In some instances, as when gold and silver together are refined by fire, the main objective is to separate the pure metal from the dross, for *retention*. They contrast sharply to the waste materials that the refiners dump on a disposal heap. One

¹⁶In view of Paul's usage (cf. n. 14), his idea in 1 Cor is more probably "be assigned loss." Cf. Fee, *First Corinthians* 143. He might mean that the worker is faced with loss of his "work," which burns. But this is redundant. Paul has just stated that the "work" is "burned." However, due to the close continuity between a Christian's "work" and his "reward" for it (cf. 1 Cor 3:8), diminishment of one leads to reducing. The subject of reward allows the statement in v 15 to be parallel with that of v 14, but to state the other result, to round out a contrast. The man whose work is of the quality that "remains" will receive reward; the man whose work is faulty and "burns" will be assigned loss with reference to the reward in the measure of it he might have had potentially (cf. Barrett, *First Corinthians*). The *μισθόν* (*misthon*, "reward") (v 14) is relevant to v 15 and reasonably suggests an accusative of relation with respect to "experience loss" (Stumpff, "zēmia" 890; Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians* 65). The passive *zēmioō* might be read, "he shall be reduced" in respect to reward (so Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians* 65). This is because: (1) the man *himself* receives reward in v 14, and so v 15 probably conveys the other side of the picture, also relating to the man himself; (2) in 2 Cor 5:10, a man *himself* receives the things done in his body, both good and bad. The things are presumably the fitting reward and the loss of reward that are in continuity with the work (Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973] 160). (3) The *αὐτός* (*autos*, "he himself") can be adequately explained. It may be that the person is diminished in respect to his capacity for special reward. Paul contrasts with that the fact that the man himself will be saved, and will be within the general sphere of blessedness/reward, which is the realm of eternal life, glory, the kingdom, the saints' inheritance, etc.

such example is Prov 27:21: "The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold, and a man is tested by the praise accorded him."¹⁷ This idea fits 1 Cor 3 in some degree.

However, metals in the OT also can focus on *value*. In 2 Chr 32:27 they are included in a list of examples describing King Hezekiah's great wealth in treasured things. The verse says, "Now Hezekiah had immense riches and honor; and he made for himself treasuries for gold, silver, precious stones, spices, shields and all kinds of valuable articles. . . ." Then v 29 adds, "For God had given him very great wealth." The emphasis on value is clear.¹⁸ The theme of value also is quite suitable to 1 Cor 3. The things of a worker that survive Christ's discerning appraisal are aspects in the "work" that Christ judges to be valuable. They are the "gold, silver, precious stones." But both OT ideas, *retention* and *value* worth retaining, fit naturally with 1 Cor 3. With this in mind, the bottom line is, "Build with value that will last!" Each servant's¹⁹ work will draw Christ's verdict answering the question, "what sort is it?" i.e. what is its real quality in His true sense of value? (v 13)

IV. THE DEFINITION OF THE MATERIALS

Scholars have come to different conclusions on what the six symbols and the "work" are in a co-laborer's life and work. It can be helpful to see how these writers define Paul's terms. After this articulation, the object will be to support the explanation that is the most probable.

¹⁷Cf. also Job 23:10; Ps 66:10; Zech 13:9; Rev 3:18.

¹⁸Other examples include the following. Gold, silver and precious stones may be combined to stress value (Job 28:15-19; Dan 11:38; cf. Rev 18:12). Or, only gold and precious stones occur (1 Kgs 10:2; 2 Chr 9:1; Prov 3:14, 15; Ezek 27:22; cf. Rev 17:4; 18:16; 21:18-21). Or precious stones appear alone (Exod 28:17-21; 1 Kgs 5:17; 6:7; Isa 54:11-12; Ezek 28:12-15). Or only gold and silver are listed (Gen 13:2; 24:35, 53; 44:8; Exod 3:22; Ps 119:72; cf. Acts 3:6; 2 Tim 2:20, 21). And gold can occur alone (Ps 19:10). Naturally, these valued objects were used early to build religious things men held to be of great value, whether false gods (Ps 115:4; Prov 3:14) or God's dwelling places (often in the Tabernacle, Exod 25-40, and Temple, 1 Kgs 6-7).

¹⁹This is, first of all, each official minister who leads in the church, and then other Christians who do work according to the example of the leader's model, whether good quality or bad.

1. *Some have been persuaded that Paul uses the symbols to portray doctrine.* Often those who adopt this view limit the meaning only to doctrine, regarding this as a natural conclusion.²⁰ The main reasons are fairly evident.

(1) This explanation recognizes a correspondence between Paul's own work as an example and the work that others do. When Paul laid the foundation at Corinth, he preached the truth about Christ, making clear that doctrinal truth about Christ is the foundation for men's faith (cf. 1 Cor 3:5). Similarly he "planted" or "sowed" the gospel seed in people whose hearts were fertile, receptive soil for the truth. The recipients, products of but distinct from Paul's message itself, became "God's tillage" and "God's building." So when Paul cautions another person in v 10 to be careful how he builds, Paul refers to work that consists of giving doctrine that is consistent with the sound indoctrination Paul has given. Along this line, Meyer reasons: "The ἐποικοδομεῖν (*epoikodomein*, "to build upon") takes place *on* the persons through doctrines. . . ."²¹

(2) A second reason adduced in support of the doctrine interpretation is also near in the context. The "gold, silver" etc. depict the wisdom of God in contrast to the wisdom of this world (3:18-20). A good antidote to false thinking (doctrine) is good wholesome doctrine, the truth. The ideology or philosophy of the world that originates from man's thinking is met by giving God's perspective or set of values. Job 28:15-19 places the value of wisdom from God above the preciousness of gold, silver and all precious stones. This theme is frequent in the Proverbs. Paul, consistent with this essential thrust, could use the same OT symbols to depict the value of God's wisdom as expressed in pure doctrine.

(3) If the materials represent converts (people) who will "remain" or else "burn" (worthy materials = the saved, unworthy = the unsaved), there is difficulty. How can the builder so mislead people that they, his products, finally burn in eternal lostness while he himself attains

²⁰Barrett, *First Corinthians* 89-90; J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Calvin's Commentaries, eds. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance; London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960) 75; C. W. Turner, "The Metaphors of St. Paul" (Ph.D. thesis, U. of Aberdeen, Scotland, 1956) 70-71; H. A. W. Meyer, *The Epistles to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1877) I, 92-94.

²¹Meyer, *Corinthians*, I, 94.

final salvation in 1 Cor 3:15?²²

Some interpreters complicate the picture further by explaining the materials or work to be doctrine. They ingeniously think up their own exact meanings for each of the six symbols in v 12. Such imagined meanings appear to be arbitrary, contrived and subjective, imposition into the Word rather than exposition of it. One claim is that gold means preaching the truth of Christ's *deity*, silver Christ's *redemptive work*, etc. The notions vary with the interpreter, and reveal more about the advocates' imaginations than about Paul's intention.

2. *Others have the materials symbolize people.* Why people?

(1) The foundation itself is Christ, a person, so the superstructure that His co-laborers build upon Him can be other persons, "God's building."

(2) People are built together into the church in Jesus' figure of Matt 16:18, Paul's in Eph 2:12-21 and Peter's in 1 Pet 2:4-10. In Eph 2, the saints are "built upon" the foundation (v 20) and the building consists of Jews and Gentiles "built together" (vv 21, 22; cf. 1 Pet 2:5, "being built"). If it is people that comprise the work of God in the other passages, it can be people that Paul means in 1 Cor 3:12-15.

(3) The materials of 1 Cor 3:12 are put to the test of fire, which suggests OT verses where people are pictured by gold and silver being tested by fire (Job 23:10; Ps 66:10).²³

(4) Paul in 2 Tim 2:20, 21 uses "gold and silver" vessels to depict people. These vessels, which are symbols of people in v 21, are set in contrast to vessels of "wood and earth." There are possible links with 1 Cor 3. The use of gold and silver is one of these, occurring in both texts. Another connection may be the "house," which some take to represent the church (though some view it as the world). One big difference is that the materials in 2 Tim 2 are *vessels*, whereas 1 Cor 3 refers to building substances. Still, as 2 Tim 2 uses the symbols to draw a distinction between people, Paul may intend the same thing by employing "gold, silver, precious stones" in 1 Cor 3.

(5) Paul sees the Corinthian believers as "my work in the Lord" (1 Cor 9:1). Paul had begun the work at Corinth, being the converts' "father" in the faith (4:15). If people are his own "work," people can

²²F. Godet, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) I, 183; Meyer, *Corinthians I*, 93; Turner, "The Metaphors" 70.

²³Cf. also Prov 27:21; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:3.

be the "work" of those who continue building on the same foundation.

(6) The problem that those favoring the doctrine view sometimes raise against the people view could be resolved. It is the difficulty of viewing the worker himself as saved (3:15) if people who are his "work" finally burn up in God's judgment. Granted, it is hard to grasp how a man can really wind up saved himself if he has so misled the people who comprise his unworthy work and this kind of work burns. Yet salvation is God's unadulterated *gift*, based on Christ's work and purchase (cf. 1 Cor 6:20; Eph 1:7). In Eph 1:7, it is based on Christ's blood, not any merit of the Christian. It is a boon grounded in redemption, not the co-laborer's results (work) in the lives of others. A person can be saved, do work ostensibly for Christ, yet have some ideas that are misguided; or he can be, at times and in some aspects, a poor example that blights, misleads, and discourages others to turn away, even to hell. Later, *he himself* may "straighten up and fly right," but be unable to go back, locate all of those he caused to spurn Christ and the Christian way, and so undo the damage done through his past unworthy work.

And even if an interpreter insists on the doctrine view, imagining that his view avoids this problem, it has not necessarily done so. The same problem applies to the doctrine view. How may a worker himself finally be saved (1 Cor 3:15) if in some inconsistent instances his work of teaching has misled some persons to their eternal detriment? Actually, whether an interpreter favors the people view or the doctrine view of the materials in 1 Cor 3, the final recourse must be to God's amazing grace which reaches beyond the grasp of finite minds in cases of human failures.

This may or may not ease the view that the six materials are symbols of people a worker has placed upon the foundation or helped through ministry. The people view has still other difficulties, whether it is valid in 1 Cor 3 or not. For example, an interpreter does not follow a true analogy to 1 Cor 3 when he adduces proof from OT passages where gold and silver depict people tested by fire. Such texts do not combine two things: first, people who *build* with materials, and second, the *materials* themselves representing other people.

For the people view, a problem also attaches to the 2 Tim 2 argument. That passage explicitly equates persons with the gold and silver; 1 Cor 3 does not. Also, the "work" that burns in 1 Cor 3 is not so easily identified as people in the fire of God's wrath, hell. One reason for this is that the *saved* are those who are tested in the fire with which 1 Cor 3 is dealing. This fire relates to both good work and

bad. But elsewhere where Scripture refers to fire in which the *unsaved* are judged, none of the saved go into that fire. It is indicated that they have an altogether different treatment (Matt 13:42, cf. v 43; 2 Thess 1:7-9, cf. v 10; Rev 20:11-15, cf. v 15a).

3. *Others think that the materials symbolize character.* Kennedy put 1 Cor 3 with passages that refer to "the hidden realities of human character."²⁴

4. *Many see the materials as incorporating a combination of things.* Such interpreters do not mention simply one thing, as doctrine or people. They specifically include two or more of the meanings this discussion has surveyed. For example, Gärtner says that Paul's warning not to destroy God's temple (vv 16, 17) is directed against a worker's having both "false doctrine and a life in conflict with the will of God."²⁵ Godet saw the materials as "The spiritual life of the members . . . [which] is, in a certain measure, the teaching itself received, assimilated, and realized in practice."²⁶ Hanson writes that Paul's conception of the work of the ministry as preaching the gospel "is not limited to speaking alone; the minister must preach the gospel by living the life of Christ in the world."²⁷

Robertson and Plummer favor seeing fruit in *character* combined with or in persons, ". . . for the qualities must be exhibited in the lives of persons."²⁸ Pesch observes that the *κόπος* (*kopos*, "labor") and *ἔργος* (*ergos*, "work") that lead to the reward (3:8, 13-15) occur elsewhere under other images such as a worker's *κάρπος* (*karpos*, "fruit") or a *στέφανος* (*stephanos*, "crown") comprised of his converts (1 Thess 2:19). To Pesch, 2 Tim 4:8 reflects the Pauline idea in its

²⁴H. A. A. Kennedy, *St. Paul's Conceptions of the Last Things* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904) 205-7.

²⁵Gärtner, *The Temple* 60.

²⁶Godet, *First Corinthians* I, 183-84.

²⁷A. T. Hanson, *The Pioneer Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 1961) 85. The same essential view appears in Jay Shanor, "Paul as Master Builder, Construction Terms in First Corinthians" (paper read at Far West Section of the Evangelical Theological Society, April 13, 1985).

²⁸Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians* 62; cf. to the same effect W. Grundmann, "Die Übermacht der Gnade: eine Studie zur Theologie des Paulus," *NovT* IV (1960) 267-91, esp. 286-87.

reference to a "crown of righteousness." Pesch phrases this as "Christian life-conduct" or "work."²⁹ Other scholars see still different combinations within the content of the materials that lead to reward or loss of it.³⁰

5. *A proposed larger combination.* Those who view the materials as symbols for a combination of Christ-pleasing things appear to be moving in the stream of Pauline evidence. The work involves the building of further doctrinal truth upon the foundation that is Christ. This is in the lives of people who corporately comprise the "building." The process of instilling truth in people entails work in its many aspects of activity. The doctrine and the activity correlate in unity with work in terms of Christlike character which exhibits the doctrinal message and validates itself in lives of inward and outward practicality.

The focus of this discussion now turns to prove that Paul saw the "work" as fruit in attitudes, motives and other elements of character, not just doctrine and/or activity. Since many interpreters limit the materials or the "work" narrowly, or appear to, it is necessary to develop evidence in detail. Hopefully this will show the consistency of Paul's concept by correlating it in a variety of ways. Much evidence is from 1 Cor 1-4, which demonstrates the point effectively since these chapters are the context of 3:10-15.

(1) One clue to the content of the materials is reflected by Paul's exhortations. What elements are crucial to him for those who receive the epistle? He exhorts them to a spirit of unity (1:10), centered in the wisdom and the power of God. He wants them to glory in the Lord (1:29, 31), not in man (3:21); desires that they not deceive themselves, evidently by putting their confidence in the world's wisdom (3:17-19); seeks that they view the apostles as ministers and stewards accountable to God for faithfulness (4:1, 2), apparently in the way they minister (as Paul in 3:10), that is, how they do it in God's wisdom and

²⁹Wilhelm Pesch, "Der Sonderlohn für die Verkündiger des Evangeliums (I Kor 3,8.14f und Parallelen)," *Neutestamentliche* (Aufsätze, Festschrift für Josef Schmid, ed. J. Blinzler et al; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1963) 204-5.

³⁰W. Beardsley thinks "work" in 1 Cor 3:13-15 is both activity in preaching/teaching to build up the church and the product, fruit by the power of the Spirit as in 2:4-5 (*Human Achievement and Divine Vocation in the Message of Paul* [London: SCM Press, 1961] 52-60). A. C. Gaebelien, an older Bible expositor, says "work" is service which manifests Christlike character, i.e. fruit ("Romans-Ephesians," *The Annotated Bible* [9 vols.; New York: Our Hope, 1916] 99).

power; longs that they follow him (4:16) in a life-style characterized by elements of spiritual life (4:9-13). The aspects which are vital in Paul's exhortations suggest those he is concerned with in their "work."

(2) Paul's purpose clauses reflect the things he regards as crucial. In chaps. 1-4 he uses eight (or nine, if 1:7 is seen as a purpose idea³¹) purpose clauses.³² The point for 3:12 is his attention to qualities of life experience. This suggests that the materials are symbols of content, not doctrinal but making up the Christian life that infleashes that doctrine. This embraces the spiritual dimensions, attitudes, character and values of the Christian life. It refers to the life empowered by God to express the operation of God's kingdom, which Paul longs to find the Corinthian believers demonstrating (4:20).

(3) Paul is warning in 3:10-17. Values reflected in warnings in this context may be clues to discovering what men should seek and shun in the "work" that prepares them to receive reward. Paul uses three other warnings in chapters 1-4. In 3:19, he warns against this

³¹In 1:7a the ὥστε (*hōste*, "so that") + μὴ ὑστερεῖσθαι (*mē hystereisthai*, "you do not lack") could denote purpose, but probably means that having no lack in any gift is the result of the rich endowment in vv 5, 6 (Barrett, *First Corinthians* 38; Godet, *First Corinthians* I, 54; Meyer, *First Corinthians* I, 19). The emphasis is on what God has given to outfit saints for spiritual experience in church life, corporately or individually. They have been enriched in terms of gifts in "all speech and all knowledge," both of which Paul relates directly to edification, building up other saints, in chapter 14. Paul thinks of each gift as a "manifestation of the Spirit" and in close relation to its effect in experience, that of ministering "profit" (12:7), and so its exercise with a spirit sensitive to building up the church. Whether purpose or result, 1:7a is relevant in an inquiry into how Paul defines the materials for building in 3:12.

³²The eight purpose clauses apart from 1:7a are: 1:28, ἵνα (*hina*, "so that") + καταργήσῃ (*katargēsē*, "he might render inoperative"); 1:29, ὅπως (*hopōs*, "so that") + καυχῆσεται (*kauchēsetai*, "he might boast"); 1:31, ἵνα (*hina*, "so that") + καυχᾶσθω (*kauchasthō*, "let him boast"); 2:5, ἵνα (*hina*, "so that") + ἦ (*ē*, "it might be"); 2:12, ἵνα (*hina*, "so that") + εἰδῶμεν (*eidōmen*, "we might know"); 4:6, ἵνα (*hina*, "so that") + μάθητε (*mathēte*, "you might learn"); 4:6, ἵνα (*hina*, "so that") + φυσιοῦσθε (*phusiousthe*, "you might be puffed up"); and 4:8, ἵνα (*hina*, "so that") + συμβασιλεύσωμεν (*sumbasileusōmen*, "we might reign together"). The point from these that bears on 3:12 is Paul's recurring focus on characteristics of life experience. This points toward viewing the materials and the "work" of 3:12-15 as including the content of the Christian's life.

world's wisdom, which he may connect with "wood, hay, straw" seven verses earlier. In 4:6-17, he warns against a proud, self-exalting spirit in contrast with the apostles' humility in their hardships. He wants believers to follow his example (v 16), as he faithfully follows Christ (v 17; 11:1). The heart of his concern is a product consisting of truly Christian character and attitude. Finally, 4:18-21 warns with regard to a Corinthian "puffed up" attitude in the Corinthian church. Paul may decide to visit them with a "rod," i.e. in discipline. He will look for evidence of the power of God's kingdom at work in their lives. Their speech may betray an absence of spiritual power and give evidence of carnal elements such as "envy" and "strife" in 3:3. If the power is conspicuously present in them for God's apostle to see when he comes to "judge,"³³ it will facilitate their approval in the test of the greater judgment by the apostle's God in the future day. The Lord Himself will search each builder's materials looking for the "power"!

(4) Paul's words about the materials occur within a contrast. It seems valid to seek the nature of the materials by looking into other contrasts in the context. There are about thirty contrasts in chapters 1-4. In many Paul speaks about elements of the spiritual life or of doctrine and the life that is consistent with it. Omitting the contrasts in our immediate passage (3:11, 12, 14-15), about twenty-seven remain. Of these, at least thirteen pertain to the spiritual life, to fruit that pleases Christ or its opposite, based on doctrine.³⁴ Some other contrasts relate to doctrine or to communicating it. But even these, in Paul's thought, may be closely united to spiritual experience with its enlivened character, activity and attitudes. An example is 1:17a. God did not send Paul to baptize but to preach the gospel. Is this preaching

³³In 4:19, "I shall know," as Godet says, is "the language of a judge proceeding to make an examination, . . . a forewarning of the judgment about to follow (ver. 21)" (*First Corinthians* I, 236). To the same effect, cf. Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians* 92.

³⁴The thirteen are: unity, not disunity (1:10); glorying in the Lord, not in the flesh (1:29, 31); speaking in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, not in mere human speech, wisdom and power (2:1-4); faith in God's power, not in man's wisdom (2:5); no one knows the Lord's mind, but we have the mind of Christ (2:16); not as to spiritual but as to carnal (3:1); "I judge not myself, but the Lord judges me" (4:3, 4); "we are fools, but you are wise" (4:10); "we are weak, you strong" (4:10); "we are despised, you honorable" (4:10); not to shame but to warn (4:14); not the speech but the power (4:19); the kingdom is not in word, but in power (4:20).

in word only, or by word in the context of an exemplary life?

One contrast especially suggests the content that is the essence of the materials, giving them quality or the lack of it. It is spirituality and carnality. At their core both involve attitudes, such as unity or disunity (1:10-12; 3:3, 4). Paul's counsel in 3:5-9, which leads into the context under discussion, is a direct antidote to the carnality in vv 3 and 4. Since the contrast is in attitudes, the solution (God will reward for good materials rather than bad) must contrast the same spiritual or carnal attitudes.

(5) Paul introduces the context of 3:12 by beginning with the vital ingredients of his own example (v 10). This suggests the kinds of elements he would desire of others who follow his example. In his own work, he preaches Christ's cross as the power and wisdom of God (1:18, 24; 2:1-4). The true wisdom (2:6-10) is made up of things the Spirit of God reveals. Persons who are "mature" or "spiritual" can receive these (2:6, 12-16; 3:1). In 3:3, 4, carnality involves *inability* to receive spiritual realities from God but also characteristics of life-style that manifest the lack of these. These unspiritual dispositions are exemplified by "envy" and "strife" in exalting human leaders competitively and fostering disunity. Paul does not see doctrine in isolation but in relation to spiritual attitudes. Again, in 3:5-9 Paul trains his spotlight on the matter of attitudes. He emphasizes God's grace and giving the credit to God for any increase He grants.

(6) Paul relates what "remains" or "burns" in a builder's work to the necessity of holiness in vv 16 and 17. Holiness must impregnate work valued by God and appraised as "gold," etc. Believers corporately comprise God's "temple." God's temple, as God Himself, is holy. "Holiness befits thy house . . ." (Ps 93:5; cf. "glory" in 29:9). So work that scores well in God's test of believers consists in elements with the same nature as God's nature, holiness. The indwelling Spirit and spiritual content with Christ-pleasing value are vital. In terms of what Paul says about believers and the Spirit in 2:1-3:4, the work that Christ will approve for reward will be in harmony with the Spirit, a reflection of His own nature and power. The work should, therefore, be fulfilled "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (2:4), power that God alone, not man, can supply (2:5). And it must involve receiving and exemplifying in word or deed things that the Spirit has revealed, elements that express "the mind of Christ" (2:9-16).

(7) The close unity of 4:5 with 3:10-15 offers a means of defining the content of the materials of 3:12. Both texts speak of the same future judgment. This is reasonable in light of factors that tie the two

together. The Lord is the judge in both; both refer directly to a time of Judgment, "the day" (3:13) and "the time" (4:5). A striking resemblance links "the man's work shall be made manifest" (*φάνερον*, [*phaneron*, "manifest," 3:13) and the Lord "will make manifest (*φανερῶσει* [*phanerōsei*]) the counsels of the hearts" (4:5). Also, both use *ἕκαστος* [*hekastos*, "every man"]. The significance is that the materials Christ will examine at the judgment (4:5) reach inwardly, even to the "counsels of the hearts." This naturally leads one to perceive that in the judgment of 3:12-15 the materials consist of elements that go beyond doctrine and outward activity per se. They also incorporate inward attitudes and motives. Grundmann discerned this. To him, 4:5 and Rom 2:16 show that the "work" involves inward dispositions that each worker must have interwoven in his ministry, as in Phil 1:15, 16 and 2:20, 21.³⁵ This leads Grundmann to see the worker's life-work or produce of 1 Cor 3:12 as "fruit for God," involving both inward dispositions and converts.

(8) Paul connects "gold . . ." etc. with a building and the co-laborer's work that builds. Passages where he uses this figure or words pertaining to building provide evidence of the content he sees in the materials. The word "edify" (*οἰκοδομέω* [*oikodomeō*]) is his word in the building figure. He adds the prefix, *ἐποικοδομέω* [*epoikodomeō*, "I build upon"), to describe building *upon* Christ the foundation (3:10, 12). In passages where he employs the "building" language, Paul emphasizes strongly the qualities of a Spirit-influenced life.

One example is 1 Cor 8:1, "love edifies [builds up]." Paul contrasts love to being "puffed up" in pride, the carnal attitude found in 3:3 and 4:6, 7. Another instance, among several,³⁶ is Rom 14:19. Paul exhorts the saints to pursue dispositions which promote peace and "build up" each other. The introductory *οὖν* (*oun*, "therefore") shows that v 19 follows logically from previous considerations. These considerations are twofold, marked out by an explanatory *γάρ* (*gar*, "for") that begins v 17 and again v 18. Before that, Paul says that a person is not to exercise his freedom to eat meat if this would destroy another person for whom Christ died. For in such a case what the believer thinks he is at liberty to do may be spoken of as evil. It is not

³⁵Grundmann, "Die Ubermacht" 69-70; also "Paulus" 286-87.

³⁶Other examples: 1 Cor 10:23; 14:3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 26; 2 Cor 10:8; 12:19; 13:10; Eph 2:19-22; 3:17; 4:1-16; 1 Thess 5:11.

worth insisting on practicing one's freedom where serving his own interests would harm another. At this point, Paul gives the two explanations why a person ought not to insist on asserting his freedom. First, "the kingdom of God is not meat and drink (these are not the decisive concerns of blessedness in the kingdom), but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." These three may bear their ethical, subjective sense, i.e. denoting experiential characteristics, or be taken in their forensic meaning.³⁷ In either case, experiencing such realities can be closely related to and flow from the forensic facts. Living in the practical good of these not only benefits a person's own spiritual life, but furnishes him in "things of the building up of one another" (v 19). His work has the ingredients that Christ judges to be of value.

The Christian should set a high priority on these because he seeks the profit of his brother above his own freedom in such cases. Since these values are of crucial importance, Paul adds a second explanation (v 18): ". . . he that in these things serves Christ is well-pleasing to God and approved by men." These are marks of good quality in the work of building which win favor of both God and men. In view of these reasons for devoting one's life to the advantage of brothers (vv 17, 18), Paul's "therefore" in v 19 is natural. Since the qualities God deems of worth in His kingdom are "righteousness, peace, and joy," believers ought to "pursue after the things that promote peace." The words that follow "peace" in v 19, "and things of building up one another," give warrant to understand not only "righteousness" and "joy" immediately from v 17, but even Paul's more expanded cluster of fruit (Gal 5:22, 23). In the Rom 14 context, peace in particular is most fitting in view of the potential lack of peace among Christians in vv 1, 3, 10, 13a, 15, 16, and 20. Believers provoke tensions with one another by exercising a spirit that harps on criticism. They censor and castigate others over differing convictions and practices.

Paul sees the work of building others in Rom 14 expressing itself in the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces. This appears in the context with a sobering reminder. Christians must realize that all will give an account before the judgment seat of God (vv 10, 12). The building work, the fruit, will be subjected to the test of Christ's evaluation. This should "therefore" (v 13) prompt a believer not to judge another in a

³⁷J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) II, 194. Cf. his defense of the ethical, experiential sense, not the forensic, but cf. C. E. B. Cranfield who favors the forensic idea (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) II, 718-19.

harmful and carnal sense. It ought to direct him toward preventing another from falling (v 13) and helping build him up in areas valued by Christ (v 19).

6. *Conclusion about the materials.* The lines of evidence converge on a broad definition of the content of the six building materials. Work on the building has more than doctrine and activity per se interwoven within it. Fruit in the worker's motives and character also give quality to work that is true to Christ the foundation. This is the work that will elicit the approval of Christ when He judges (v 13). It is the kind of work that will continue to lead to the reward that Christ deems equitable for it. For each worker will receive his own reward according to the standard of his own labor (v 8).

CONCLUSION

The conclusion is that the materials contrast three qualities that are of such a nature as to bring reward from Christ with three qualities whose nature is such that they will diminish the degree of one's reward. It is best in defining the materials not to limit the meaning to doctrine, people, activity, or character. Paul more probably intended to depict a combination of things in service that Christ can appraise as fitted for reward. These, in the power of the Holy Spirit, are sound doctrine, activity (effort), motives and character.