

## Building with Gold, Silver and Precious Stones

The major revelation in the entire Bible is the unique divine economy of the unique Triune God (Eph. 1:10; 3:9; 1 Tim. 1:4), which is to dispense Himself in Christ into His chosen people that He may have a house to express Himself, which house is the church (3:15), the Body of Christ. The centrality and universality of this divine economy is the all-inclusive and unsearchably rich Christ as the embodiment and expression of the Triune God (Col. 2:9; 1:15-19; John 1:18), and the goal of the divine economy is the church as the Body, the fullness, the expression, of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; 3:8-11), which will consummate in the New Jerusalem as the union, mingling, and incorporation of the processed and consummated Triune God and His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite people (Recovery Version, Gen. 1:1, note 1). The Bible unveils two great works of God for the fulfillment of His economy. The first is God's work of creation, in which He created man in His image and according to His likeness as a vessel to contain Himself as life (v. 26; 2:7; Rom. 9:21, 23; 2 Cor. 4:7). The second is His work of building, which is revealed and developed progressively in many types, shadows, and figures in the Old Testament, accomplished in the church in the New Testament (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 4:16), and consummated in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21—22).

The first detailed picture of the building of God is a scenery of the tree of life, signifying God Himself as life to man in the form of food (Gen. 2:9), and a river going forth from Eden, signifying the river of water of life as man's life and life supply (v. 10; John 7:38), which issue in three precious building materials: gold, bdellium, and onyx (Gen. 2:12). In the New Testament Paul charges the believers to build the house of God with gold, silver, and precious stones (1 Cor. 3:12). Finally, the end of the Bible reveals the New Jerusalem, the greatest and ultimate sign in the holy Scriptures, as a city built with gold, pearl, and precious stones (Rev. 21:18-21). As we shall see, these precious materials typify the Triune God as the basic elements of the structure of God's eternal building. Therefore, the central and divine thought of the Scriptures is that God is seeking a divine building as the mingling of Himself with humanity, a living composition of persons redeemed by and mingled with Himself as the basic elements of His building. This vision of the central thought and work of God to produce His building must

govern the living and work of all the believers in the church today.

However, there is a great possibility that instead of building with gold, silver, and precious stones, the believers may build with the worthless materials of wood, grass, and stubble produced by them in the flesh (1 Cor. 3:12). Hence, each of us, every member of the Body of Christ, must take heed how we build. In His infinite wisdom, God promised a reward for the proper builders of His temple, and He issued a warning for the destroyers of His building. Those who build the house of God with the precious materials of the Triune God will receive a reward from Him on the day of judgment, but those who build with worthless materials will be disciplined by the Lord through the consuming of their works, and they will be saved only as through fire (vv. 14-15). Moreover, those who thus destroy the temple of God will suffer God's punishment (v. 17). This is the word of righteousness in the New Testament (Heb. 5:13) concerning the Lord's evaluation and judgment of the life and work of the believers for the building of God.

### A Dim Understanding of the Figures in 1 Corinthians 3

In 1 Corinthians 3:10-13 Paul says,

According to the grace of God given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid a foundation, and another builds upon it. But let each man take heed how he builds upon it. For another foundation no one is able to lay besides that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. But if anyone builds upon the foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, stubble, the work of each will become manifest.

From Genesis 2 to Revelation 21, precious substances are consistently utilized as types of materials for the divine building. It is remarkable, therefore, that throughout Christian history expositions of 1 Corinthians 3 have been short of insight and of the riches embodied in the figures mentioned in it. The church fathers of the ante- and post-Nicene eras add little in the way of enlightenment concerning our building with gold, silver, and precious stones. Augustine called this passage an "obscure saying" of the apostle (*quod obscure dictum est*), the materials

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simply being “the things that belong to the Lord” versus “the things that are of the world” (“Enchiridion” 259-260). He is, however, helpful to clarify that it is the believers, not simply the unsaved, whose works may be burned: “They should build on it, ‘gold, silver, and precious stones;’ and should have nothing to fear from either fire: not only that which is to consume the ungodly for ever, but also that which is to purge those who are to escape through the fire” (“Psalms” 103), that is, the believers, who will be judged by Christ at His coming back.

True to the philosophical Alexandrian school, Clement called the worthy materials a “gnostic superstructure,” that is, spiritual knowledge, built on the foundation of faith (450), and Origen saw them only as incorporeal “blessings” in contrast to sins (605). Gregory of Nyssa generalized them to be doing the Lord’s commandments and a “virtuous life” of the believers (363), and Gregory Nazianzen compared them to the unalloyed character of those who take the lead in the church (207). Chrysostom applied the three kinds of precious materials more imaginatively, seeing them as diverse roads carved by the Master for believers of varying gifts: “Thou canst not be the precious stone? then be the gold. Thou canst not be the gold? then be the silver, if only thou art resting upon the foundation” (262). Athanasius seems to stand alone as one who saw 1 Corinthians 3 more deeply in the light of God’s economy; we will consider him shortly.

In the light that Martin Luther received, he could perceive only one application for 1 Corinthians 3:12, which he employed colorfully a number of times. He saw the precious building materials as the truth of the Scriptures, in contrast to the worthless “man-teaching” and customs of the papal church. He says,

What else do I contend for but to bring every one to an understanding of the difference between the divine Scripture and human teaching or custom, so that a Christian may not take the one for the other and exchange gold for straw, silver for stubble, wood for precious stones. (3:372)

Speaking of the church fathers themselves, he says, “When they build without the Scriptures, i.e., without gold, silver, precious stones,...we must follow the judgment of St. Paul, and know how to distinguish between gold and wood” (5:171). In general he concludes,

This Christian, holy people is to be known by this, that it has God’s Word, though in quite unequal measure, as St. Paul says...Those who have it pure are called those who build on the foundation, gold, silver, precious stones; those who have it impure are they who build hay, straw, wood. (5:270)

A surprising number of the better expositors in recent times are content with Luther’s interpretation of the building materials merely as sound or unsound teachings. Henry Alford proposes that 1 Corinthians 3 speaks not of the life of the believers in general but of the duty and reward of teachers. Specifically, the precious materials refer to the “matter of the ministers’ teaching,” and the worthless materials to the “various perversions of true doctrine, and admixtures of false philosophy which were current” (2:493). Marvin R. Vincent likewise suggests that Paul speaks of “the body of truth and doctrine which different teachers may erect on the one true foundation” (202). With the exception of the more far-reaching, imaginative allegories, and perhaps the overly philosophical speculations of Clement, we do not disagree with the foregoing interpretations of the materials of the building mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3. To be sure, to build with the Scriptures, as Luther plainly declares, is to build with precious material (Psa. 19:10; 119:72, 127; Prov. 8:10). The building up of the church depends fundamentally on the teaching of the apostles and the faithful impartation of

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that teaching by the gifted members and leading ones in the church (Acts 2:42; 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 5:17). However, the general understanding of the figures of gold, silver, and precious stones as referring mainly to proper teachings and deeds of faith is a perception in dim light, lacking an intrinsic view of the central work of God, which is to work Himself in Christ into our being, making Himself one with us and making us one with Him.

#### **A More Intrinsic, Subjective View**

A more subjective view of the materials for God’s building is seen in the writings on the inner spiritual life in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. In *The Gold of the Sanctuary*, T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the intrinsic value of the incorruptible, eternal things of God, embodied in Christ and wrought into the believers in our secret, hidden life with Him:

God is primarily concerned with intrinsic value, and that is not with Him a comparative matter—it is an absolute matter. “The fire...shall prove each man’s work of what sort it is”...and I think, in the light of the New Testament,

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we would be right in adding “the fire shall try every man”, and not only his work. (13)

Austin-Sparks is not content merely to uplift sound teaching and proper interpretations of Scripture. He points out the need to have God Himself as the gold added to us. It is the “essence of Christ” (15) being added to us that God desires and that He is operating in us through testing and hiddenness:

The test of everything with us will be: How much of God really came in by our having been here?...How much of it results in more of God—not more of knowledge, not more of mental apprehension, but how much more of God. (27)

Austin-Sparks tells us that the oneness in nature of the Son with the Father is the archetypal gold that is able to abide the test of every fire. He adds in conclusion,

The Lord Jesus made it perfectly clear that such a union as existed between Him and His Father could exist between us and Himself, and with the Father; not in Deity, Godhead, but in real, living organic oneness and fellowship. (54)

To Austin-Sparks, therefore, the gold of the sanctuary is the incorruptible, intrinsically valuable “deposit of God” (27), that portion of God Himself that is wrought into us through our “long, deep, secret hidden history” with Him (17). This is an improved, more intrinsic view of gold, silver, and precious stones.

In *Building Gold, Silver and Precious Stones*, N. A. Woychuk presents a deeply devotional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3. To build with gold, he says, is to practice personal, enjoyable, and conscious communion with God to apprehend His unsearchable riches (69-70, 94), to possess Him through trials (77), to eat the hidden manna, Christ as our heavenly sustenance (83-84; Rev. 2:17), and to delight in Him and be replenished by Him (88). Secondary to our mining of the gold is our experience of silver, which, he says, is divine fellowship with the believers, the common delight in the Lord with all those who walk in the light, joint consecration of heart and soul (99), continuing steadfastly in the fellowship of the apostles (101; Acts 2:42, 46), and speaking Christ to one another (109-110; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Thus, he says, to build with silver is to be joined together, knit together, and blended together, and to strive together, follow together, dwell together, work together, and rejoice together in the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:2; 1 Cor. 12:24; Phil. 1:27; 3:17; Psa. 133:1; 2 Cor. 6:1; Rom. 12:15). Woychuk adds, “This is the God-designed means of grace not only for the individual strengthening of the believers, but also for the edification of the whole

body of Christ” (113, 110). Consequent to the experience of gold and silver is that of precious stones, which Woychuk sees as the divine art of the soul winner that causes men of clay to become stones in God’s building (119; 1 Pet. 2:5).

### Incomplete Ministries with a Shortage of Vision

The expositions of both T. Austin-Sparks and N. A. Woychuk are inspiring and insightful into the inner life and God’s way of dealing with the individual in life. However, we must be fair and balanced to point out some shortcomings in their otherwise remarkable ministries. Austin-Sparks was a rare person in seeing and experiencing the intrinsic things of life, but his ministry did not advance to see that the building up of the church as the Body of Christ is the ultimate goal of our experience of Christ in God’s economy. Writing in the same period of time, Watchman Nee says,

A Christian must see not only that he is a believer but also that he is a member of the Body...We have to see that we are members in the Body and that we cannot be separated from other members...Our living should be in the Body, through the Body, and for the Body; this should be our standard. (*Mystery* 65, 70)

Because the ministry of Watchman Nee centered on the experience of Christ and took the Body of Christ as its universal goal and the local churches as its practical goal, it represents the up-to-date advance of the Lord’s revelation and the vision for this age. Although Austin-Sparks was one through whom God dispensed many riches of life, his ministry does not convey an adequate vision of the building up of the local churches as the practical expressions of the Body of Christ, and as such, it lacks a proper completion. Moreover, Austin-Sparks speaks only of a “great stocktaking” of our life and work in a general way (19), but he conveys little light concerning the judgment of the believers’ living and work at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10).

As indicated above, the work of Woychuk bears much more flavor of the experience and enjoyment of the corporate aspect of the building of God as revealed in 1 Corinthians 3. He also speaks concerning the discernment of the believers’ work and the outcome of their judgment. Concerning the proving of each man’s work by fire (1 Cor. 3:13), he says,

The elemental fire is an appropriate outward symbol of the all-searching judgment of God to which all our works shall be subjected in that Day. As fire does, so does God, in the end, thoroughly search out and reveal the true nature of all that we have wrought, and all but that which has abiding eternal quality will be utterly destroyed...And

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the Scripture speaks to us on this subject specifically, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). “We” must all appear. This refers to all the believers...Let every man take heed. Be not deceived. (167, 169)

However, Woychuk lacks an adequate conclusion with respect to the judgment of the believers’ works. Concerning those whose works are consumed at the judgment seat, he writes,

They themselves are saved, “yet so as by fire,” that is, barely—just saved and no more. Their works perish; but their salvation abides. A life-work destroyed in a moment. A life lived and no fruit. No “well-done” from the Master, because all has been “ill-done.”...Their energies and their time wasted! Their testimony lost! All their life lived for nothing! Yet the believer himself will be saved. He will go to heaven. (175)

**I**t is regrettable that the final sentence above comes, like a dead fly in the perfumer’s ointment (Eccl. 10:1), to undo the savor and faithfulness of his exposition. The righteous word of the New Testament concerning the evaluation of believers at the judgment seat of Christ does not read in this manner. To be sure, to “suffer loss” in 1 Corinthians 3:15 is not to perish but to lose one’s reward. The salvation we have received in Christ is not by our works (Titus 3:5) and is eternal, unchangeable in nature (Heb. 5:9; John 10:28-29). Hence, those believers whose Christian works are not approved by the judging Lord and who suffer the loss of reward will still be saved, “yet so as through fire.” *Through fire*, however, indicates a punishment, to which the Lord referred in the parable of the talents: “Cast out the useless slave into the outer darkness. In that place there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:30). To be cast out into the outer darkness is not to perish; it is to be dealt with dispensationally during the coming kingdom age. It is not that the defeated believer will see his works destroyed in a minute and then “go to heaven,” as Woychuk says. Rather, he will be disqualified from participating in the enjoyment of the kingdom during the millennium for not having lived by Christ an overcoming life and for not having carried out a worthy work for the building of God.

### Gold Signifying God the Father with His Divine Nature

First Corinthians 3:12 mentions gold, silver, and precious stones as the building materials for the temple of God. In a similar way, Genesis 2:12 speaks of gold, bdellium, and onyx, which correspond to the gold, pearl, and

precious stones of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:18-21). These materials typify the Triune God as the basic elements of the structure of God’s eternal building. Gold typifies God the Father with His divine nature as the base of God’s eternal building. Elemental gold possesses several outstanding qualities that have made it exceptionally valuable throughout history. It is attractive in color and brightness, durable to the point of virtual indestructibility, and highly malleable and ductile. As a “noble metal,” it is found in nature in a pure form, and it resists deformation through metamorphosis or compounding despite the extreme conditions beneath the earth that cause most other elements to form countless and diverse relations with one another. In particular, since it does not react with oxygen and tarnishing agents, it does not rust and retains its brilliance under any kind of exposure (Wise 237, 239). Because of this, it is universally appraised as a substance of great rarity, beauty, and richness. Although gold is sometimes mentioned in the Bible as a symbol of individual wealth (Gen. 13:2; 24:35; 1 Kings 10:22), its most prevailing and conspicuous usage is in the tabernacle and temple as God’s house (Exo. 25—26; 1 Kings 6—7). The Brethren expositors opened up many of the types of the Old Testament. Concerning the gold, J. N. Darby writes,

God in the holy places was seen in His divine righteousness. It is such as He is that He must be approached. It is not merely how He deals with responsible man as such, but His own nature...This connects itself, I have no doubt, with the gold. All was of gold in the sanctuary. (200)

In contrasting the gold and bronze of the tabernacle, he says,

I get a double character of divine righteousness, typified by the gold and the brass. One, His own divine nature and delight; the other, judicial requirement from the creature, according to its place. The gold is the divine righteousness as in the nature of God. (207)

C. I. Scofield further adds that since everything in the tabernacle should be understood in typology, gold must represent “Deity in manifestation—divine glory” (100). Likewise, C. H. Mackintosh notes, “*Inside* the tent of the tabernacle all was gold,—the ark, the mercy-seat, the table, the candlestick, the altar of incense. All these were the symbols of the divine nature” (251). W. E. Vine writes that gold sets forth “the character and moral attributes of the Godhead, the fulness of which dwells in Christ” (*Writings* 45). Generally speaking, then, gold typifies God the Father with His divine nature, which is pure, unchanging, and everlasting. In His nature, God is Spirit (John 4:24), love, (1 John 4:8, 16), and light (1:5). Spirit denotes the nature of God’s person; love, the nature of



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God's essence; and light, the nature of God's expression. Second Peter 1:4 says, "He has granted to us precious and exceedingly great promises that through these you might become partakers of the divine nature." To build with gold, therefore, is to build with God Himself in the intrinsic attributes of His nature, of which we have become partakers.

### **The Divine Nature of the Father Being the Base of the New Jerusalem**

The experience of the divine nature is seen in the New Jerusalem, the greatest and ultimate sign in the Scriptures, signifying an organic constitution of the processed Triune God mingled with His regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite elect (Rev. 21:9-27). The base of the New Jerusalem is pure gold, signifying the divine nature of God as the base for its building (v. 18). The New Jerusalem is altogether of God's divine nature and takes God's divine nature as its element. The golden base of the city is also the solid foundation of the

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divine throne for the divine administration. The river of water of life, signifying the Spirit, proceeds from this administration in the middle of the New Jerusalem's street as the supply to the entire city, and in the river grows the tree of life, signifying Christ, as the main supply to the entire city through the river (22:1-2). The divine and human communication, signified by the street of gold, proceeds from this glorious golden center to reach all twelve gates of the city, in order to bring the entire city into the submission to the one divine administration and to blend the entire city into the oneness of the one divinity-mingled-with-humanity fellowship (Lee, *Application* 12).

As men in the old creation, we are vessels of clay, even of the "dust of the ground" (Gen. 2:7), but when we received Christ as our life and were regenerated, we received the divine life, the golden life (1 Pet. 1:23; John 3:15). Now as "golden men," we must be adjusted and regulated by the golden nature of God in all that we do. Our life and work must be according to, and under the ruling of, the divine life and nature within us. In this way we experience, enjoy, and partake of the divine nature in

a practical way and practice the divine fellowship of the Body of Christ, which will consummate in the New Jerusalem with its golden street, divine throne, and eternal supply.

### **Acacia Wood Overlaid with Gold Signifying the Mingling of God with Man**

Exodus 25:10 and 11 say, "They shall make an ark of acacia wood...And you shall overlay it with pure gold; inside and outside you shall overlay it." In the Ark of the Testimony, acacia wood signifies Christ's human nature, strong in character and high in standard. Christ's humanity, as portrayed especially in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is the basic element, the basic substance, for Him to be God's testimony on earth. That the acacia wood of the Ark was overlaid with gold signifies that Christ is one person with two natures, the human nature and the divine nature. He is both God and man—a God-man. That the acacia wood was overlaid with gold both inside and outside signifies the divine nature mingled with the human nature—God and man becoming one—without a third nature being produced by the mingling. This also signifies that the divine nature penetrates the human nature and also rests upon the human nature so that it may be expressed through the human nature.

Similarly, 26:15 and 29 say, "You shall make the boards for the tabernacle of acacia wood, standing up...And you shall overlay the boards with gold." That the boards were composed of the same materials used to make the Ark indicates that the boards were the enlargement and extension of the Ark. This portrays the fact that the believers in Christ, typified by the boards, are the enlargement and extension of Christ as God's testimony (John 12:23-24). Through regeneration the believers have received the uplifted humanity of Jesus and His overlaying divine nature to become boards of acacia wood overlaid with gold. The overlaying of the acacia wood with gold signifies that the divine nature of Christ has become one with the believers' human nature to be the expression of God and the reproduction, continuation, increase, duplication, and spread of Christ (Lee, *Exodus* 988-991, 1130-1133). Thus, the type of the Ark and the boards of the tabernacle indicates that through the mingling of humanity with divinity, the believers, as members of Christ, become the same as He is in life, nature, and expression but not in His Godhead.

As one in whom the mingling of the divine and human natures reached a mature peak, the apostle Paul was able to entreat the Corinthian believers through the meekness and gentleness of Christ (2 Cor. 10:1), and he longed for the believers in Philippi in the inward parts of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:8). Christ was magnified in Paul's body, and for Paul to live was Christ (vv. 20-21). In this way Paul

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built the house of God with “acacia wood overlaid with gold,” the divine nature mingled with the resurrected, uplifted, and transformed human nature. Moreover, he became a wise master builder in God’s house, exhorting the believers to do the same as he did and promising that those who build in this way will be rewarded by the Lord at His return (1 Cor. 3:10, 14).

### Silver (or Pearl) Signifying Christ the Son in His Death and Resurrection

The second building material mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3:12 is silver, signifying the redeeming Christ with all the virtues and attributes of His person and work. Elemental silver occurs in the same family as gold in the periodic classification and thus has similar properties. It is the whitest of all metals, ductile, malleable, and highly reflective and conductive. It has always been considered precious because of its scarcity, beauty, and price, and in the ancient world its value was near to that of gold (Smith 776). In Exodus 30:11-16 Jehovah commanded that every man give a half-shekel of silver as a ransom for himself. According to 38:25-27, the expiation silver, as it was called, was used to make the one hundred sockets for the boards and pillars of the tabernacle. This signifies that the redemption of Christ is the solid base for the believers’ standing in God’s dwelling place: “‘The boards for the tabernacle’ were...upheld by the sockets of silver formed out of the atonement...The whole frame-work of the tent of the tabernacle was based on that which spoke of atonement or ransom” (Mackintosh 249). The Lord Jesus was betrayed and sold for thirty pieces of silver, that is, thirty shekels of silver, the worth of a slave, in order to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 26:14-15; 27:3, 9; Exo. 21:32; Zech. 11:12; Matt. 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18-19). Thus, in the Scriptures, silver denotes Christ the Son in His all-inclusive judicial redemption, which He accomplished so that man may enter into God through Himself, the embodiment of God, as typified by the enterable tabernacle (John 1:14; 14:2-3).

**I**n Revelation 21:21 pearl is mentioned in place of silver as a precious material for the composition of the New Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Because of the beauty of its form, color, and luster, an unblemished pearl is one of the most ancient symbols of perfection (“Pearl” 820). Unlike other gemstones, pearls are organic in origin. They are produced when a foreign particle attaches to the mantle of a mollusk, such as an oyster. When the oyster is thus wounded, it secretes its life-juice around the particle and makes it into a precious pearl. This depicts Christ as the living One coming into the death waters, being wounded by us, and secreting His life over us to make us into the precious material for the building of God’s eternal expression. Similarly, bdellium is mentioned as the second precious material in Genesis 2:12. Bdellium, a pearl-like material

produced from the resin of a tree, typifies the produce of God the Son in His all-inclusive death and resurrection. That the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem are constituted of pearl signifies that the Son’s overcoming death and life-imparting resurrection are the entrance into the holy city as God’s eternal building.

Christ’s “secretion” is in two aspects: His redeeming and life-releasing death and His life-dispensing resurrection (Lee, *Application* 19-21). John 19:34 says, “One of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water.” Blood is for redemption, to deal with sins for the purchasing of the church (1:29; Heb. 9:22; Acts 20:28), and water is for imparting life, to deal with death for the producing of the church (John 12:24; 3:14-15; Eph. 5:29-30). Hence, Christ accomplished not only a redemptive death but also a life-propagating, life-multiplying, life-generating, and life-reproducing death. It is through the secretion of His life-releasing death that the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem are produced. The twelve gates are also the issue of Christ’s secretion in His life-dispensing resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3). Christ resurrected to be the life-giving Spirit to dispense life into the believers (1 Cor. 15:45). Both kinds of secretion, or dispensing, require the believers’ daily experience of the death of Christ subjectively by the power of Christ’s resurrection that they may be conformed to the death of Christ (Phil. 3:10).

**T**he believers should also seek the daily experience of the resurrection of Christ subjectively by the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who is the reality of Christ’s resurrection, that they may be conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God (1:19; Rom. 8:29). All our experiences of Christ are related to His death, His resurrection, and His Spirit. By remaining in our spirit to meet Christ as the Spirit (v. 16), we enjoy the bountiful supply of the Spirit. In this way we experience the power of Christ’s resurrection, which enables us to apply His death in our daily walk. Through this twofold secretion of Christ we are constituted the gates of the New Jerusalem as the entrance into the ultimate consummation of God’s eternal economy. Thus, both the living and the work of the believers must be altogether a matter of the subjective experience and application of Christ’s death, His resurrection, and His Spirit. Any living or work that does not pass through the cross and come out in resurrection by the daily experience of the Spirit in our spirit is considered in the Bible as wood, grass, and stubble, which will not be approved by the Lord through the testing fire at His judgment seat. What a high standard of life and work is revealed by the figure of silver and pearl! This high standard represents God’s eternal intention to build Himself into us and to build us into Himself for the producing of the ultimate consummation of His economy, the New Jerusalem.

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## Precious Stones Signifying the Holy Spirit with His Work of Transformation

The third building material mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3:12 is precious stones, signifying God the Spirit with His transforming work in different aspects for the building up of God's eternal building. These are represented in Genesis 2:12 by onyx and are revealed in detail in the description of the breastplate of the high priest in Exodus 28:6-20 and the wall of the New Jerusalem with its foundations in Revelation 21:18-20. The various precious stones mentioned in these portions are rich with significance in typology. Two stones in particular are mentioned in relation to the appearance of God Himself. Revelation 4:3 says, "He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance." Since the dark-green color of jasper signifies life in its richness, in this verse it signifies God's communicable glory in His rich life, God Himself expressed in His transmittable glory. Sardius, with its blood-like red color, signifies God as the God of redemption. On the breastplate of the high priest, the first stone was a sardius and the last a jasper, signifying that God's redeemed people have their beginning in God's redemption and their consummation in God's glory of life. The rich blue of sapphire is the appearance of God's throne (Ezek. 1:26; 10:1), signifying the heavenly condition that exists when we allow God to have the preeminence and are completely submissive to His authority and administration for the fulfilling of His purpose in us, with us, and through us. Beryl, a bluish-green or yellow precious stone, is the appearance of the Lord when He is moving, as signified by the high and awesome wheels upon the earth (1:16; 10:9) and as indicated by the appearance of the excellent Christ (Dan. 10:6), the centrality and universality of God's move on the earth for the carrying out of His economy, who appeared to Daniel in His preciousness and dignity, divine, full of life, and heavenly (Recovery Version, Rev. 4:3; Ezek. 1:16, 26; Dan. 10:5-6, notes). Thus, precious stones signify the attributes of the Triune God Himself.

In Exodus 28:21 the names of the sons of Israel were engraved on the stones of the breastplate, and in Revelation 21:14 the names of the twelve apostles are written upon the twelve foundations of the city. This indicates that both the Old Testament saints, represented by Israel, and the New Testament saints, represented by the apostles, become one with God in His divine nature to be the precious materials of the New Jerusalem. In 4:3 God's appearance is like jasper, and in 21:11 the light of the New Jerusalem is also like jasper. Moreover, both the wall of the holy city and the first layer of its foundation are built with jasper (vv. 18-19). Jasper is not the light but the light-bearer. It does not have light in itself, but the light, which is God, has been wrought into it and shines out through it. This indicates that since we, the

believers, are part of the coming New Jerusalem, we must be transformed into precious stones, with God being wrought into our being as the shining light, that we may be the light-bearers as God's expression (Recovery Version, Rev. 21:11, note 3). We, the believers in Christ, were created by God with dust (Gen. 2:7), but through our regeneration by the Spirit we became stones (John 1:42). Now by our growth in the divine life in Christ as the living stone (1 Pet. 2:4), we are being transformed into precious stones. As we behold and reflect like a mirror the glory of the Lord, we are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

## The Process of Transformation for the House of God

The Spirit's work of transformation can be seen in 1 Corinthians 3. In verse 6 Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth," and in verse 9 he says, "You are God's cultivated land." To plant, to water, and to cause to grow are all related to life. However, Paul immediately changes the figure in this verse by continuing, "You are...God's building." This indicates that the believers, who have been regenerated in Christ with God's life, are God's cultivated land, a farm in God's new creation to grow Christ in order that precious materials may be produced for God's building. As God's cultivated land with planting, watering, and growing, the church should produce plants, but the proper materials for the building of the church are gold, silver, and precious stones, all of which are minerals. Hence, the thought of transformation is implied here.

Transformation is the inward, metabolic process in which God works to spread His divine life and nature throughout every part of our being, particularly our soul, bringing Christ and His riches into our being as our new element and causing our old, natural element to be gradually discharged. (Recovery Version, Rom. 12:2, note 3)

As a result, we will be transformed into His image, that is, conformed to the image of the Son of God (8:29), the resurrected and glorified Christ, to be made the same as He is. Thus, we will be suitable for the building up of God's house. This corresponds with the thought in the Lord's parables in Matthew 13 concerning wheat, mustard seed, and meal, all of which are botanical (vv. 3-9, 24, 31, 33), and the treasure of gold or precious stones hidden in the earth and the pearl of great value (vv. 44, 46), which are the minerals for the building of God's house.

In experience the precious stones of 1 Corinthians 3:12 are the totality of gold and silver. When in our spiritual experience we have the nature of God and the redemptive and life-secreting work of Christ, the result will be

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the transformation of the Holy Spirit. This means that the Spirit transforms us by the divine nature and the cross of Christ. As the current of the divine life flows within us, the divine essence of the elements of gold, silver, and precious stones is added to us.

The more this current flows in us, the more we have the increase, the enlargement, of the divine essence. This enlargement causes transformation. Eventually, we not only grow as plants but are transformed into precious materials for God's building. (Lee, *Conclusion* 1606-1607)

### **Transformation through Our Experience of Death, Resurrection, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ**

In God's natural creation, gems are transformed from existing minerals by a complex process that involves, on the one hand, great heat and pressure in the depths of the earth and, on the other hand, contact with water and air. In the new creation, we, as components of the church, are transformed in our human nature to become precious stones for God's eternal building through the burning and pressure in our environment and the flowing of the divine life in our being. Such a process can be seen in the lives of the apostles, such as Paul, whose ministry was constituted with, and produced and formed by, the experiences of the riches of Christ gained through sufferings, consuming pressures, and the killing work of the cross. In his ministry to the Lord and to the churches, Paul shared the sufferings of Christ in abundance, being excessively burdened, under the pressure of affliction, despairing even of life, pressed, unable to find a way out, persecuted, cast down, always bearing about in the body the putting to death of Jesus, and always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake (2 Cor. 1:5, 8; 4:8-12). He worked together with God in much endurance, afflictions, necessities (*ἀνάγκαις*, urgent needs that press heavily), distresses, stripes, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watchings, and fastings (6:4-5). Through the decay of his outer man, Paul was renewed in his inner man day by day, and through the momentary lightness of affliction, a more surpassing, eternal weight of glory, the expression of God as resurrection life, was worked out in him (4:16-17). As a result, Paul manifested the life of Jesus, imparted Christ's resurrection life into others, and filled up on his part that which was lacking of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh for Christ's Body, the church (Col. 1:24). Thus, through the continual experience of the death and resurrection of Christ, in the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, Paul was wrought with the precious materials of the Triune God for the building up of the church. Concerning our own experience, Watchman Nee concludes,

That life which God has imparted to us is the gold, while

the life which God is constituting in us is the precious stone...Precious stone is that which has been formed in us by the burning work of the Holy Spirit...For this reason we should never refuse the trials that come upon us through our environment. We should never refuse the discipline of the Holy Spirit, nor complain when God's hand encircles us and encloses us in every way...Only that which has been burned into us by the Holy Spirit is precious stone. Otherwise, it is wood, grass, and stubble. (*Glorious Church* 135, 137-138)

### **God's Farm, God's Building, and God's Temple**

By all of the above, we can see the central, consistent, and deep thought conveyed by the apostle through the deep and profound expressions in 1 Corinthians 3:1-17. In verses 2 through 9 Paul speaks of the work of the apostles to plant Christ into the believers and to feed and water them so that God may give them the organic growth in the divine life, thus making them God's cultivated land to grow a harvest of Christ. The issue of

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Christ's growth in us, in the sense of this chapter, is not fruit but the precious materials of gold, silver, and precious stones. As we have seen, this strongly indicates the process of organic transformation through our experience of the divine nature of the Father, Christ's death and resurrection, and the bountiful supply of the Spirit. Then, in verses 16 and 17, the temple of God is the explanation of God's building in verse 9. The issue of our building with the precious materials is the temple of God (*ναός*, the inner temple), the sanctuary of the holy God, the temple in which the Spirit of God dwells. Thus, the building of God, the temple and house of God, the church, is the increase of Christ, the enlargement of Christ in us, for the corporate expression of the Triune God (Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Tim. 3:15-16; John 17:22; 3:30); it is the Triune God as life wrought into us continually so that under His transfusion and infusion we become His corporate expression (Eph. 3:17, 19, 21); and it is the Divine Being wrought into human beings—the mingling of God with man, that is, God mingling Himself with us. As such, it is composed of God Himself as the divine material mingled with man as the human material. Thus, in the highest sense, God builds up His holy temple



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by building Himself into man and man into Himself. This building is the Body of Christ in the present age and the New Jerusalem as the mutual dwelling place of God and His redeemed in eternity.

Athanasius understands 1 Corinthians 3 in light of the highest peak of the divine revelation, that Christ, the incarnate Word, “was made man that we might be made God” (“Incarnation” 65). In Discourse 1 against the Arians, Athanasius argues that Christ’s eternal sonship is by His partaking of the essence of the Father: “It is all one to say that God is wholly participated, and that He begets; and what does begetting signify but a Son?” (315-316). In the same way, by being begotten as the many sons of God through regeneration, the believers participate in God’s essence through the Son:

As partaking of the Son Himself, we are said to partake of God; and this is what Peter said, “that ye may be partakers in a divine nature;” as says too the Apostle, “Know ye not, that ye are a temple of God” and, “We are the temple of a living God.” (316)

To Athanasius, to be the temple of God in 1 Corinthians 3 is to be the partakers of the divine nature in 2 Peter 1:4, that is, the many sons of God who by transformation and conformation to the image of the firstborn Son of God become the same as He is in life and in nature but not in His Godhead. Thus, we become sons of God with divinity, being “divinized” in our humanity through the metabolic process of transformation, which is the building up of the church as the Body of Christ and the house of God by the building of God into man and of man into God.

Therefore, the materials of the divine building—gold, silver, and precious stones—are the processed and consummated Triune God and His transformed believers, who have been united, mingled, and incorporated with Him to be a miraculous structure of treasure for the universal display of the surpassing riches of His grace with His infinite wisdom and divine design (Eph. 2:7; 3:8-11). The work of the divine building is the believers’ partaking of God’s element and substance, their growth in the divine life, and their transformation with the divine essence, which constitute them with the Triune God Himself as the precious building materials. Thus, the building of God is a constitution of the divine element into the human element and of the human element into the divine element. If our living and work are not related to this mutual constitution, then in the eyes of God they are like wood, grass, and stubble, but if our living and work are a part of this mutual constitution, God will regard them as gold, silver, and precious stones. To be sure, such a work by the seeking and faithful believers will be rewarded by Christ at His coming back.

## Building with the Materials of the Natural Man

In 1 Corinthians 3:12 worthless, unworthy building materials are denoted by wood, grass, and stubble. These signify the knowledge, realization, and attainments that come from the believers’ natural background—such as religion, philosophy, and culture—and the natural way of living, which derives from the natural life in the untransformed soul. Wood, in contrast to gold, signifies the nature of the natural man. Grass, in contrast to silver, signifies the fallen man, the man of the flesh (1 Pet. 1:24), who has not been redeemed or regenerated by Christ. Stubble, in contrast to precious stones, signifies the work and living that issue from an earthen source and have not been transformed by the Holy Spirit. All these worthless materials are the product of the believers’ natural man together with what they have collected from their background. In God’s economy these materials are fit only to be burned (Recovery Version, 1 Cor. 3:12, note 3).

The different kinds of wood used in constructing the temple in 1 Kings 6 signify different aspects of Christ’s humanity. The floor of the house and its two doors were built with cypress (vv. 15, 34), which signifies Christ’s humanity in His death, the crucified Jesus. The beams of the house, its walls, and its inner court were built of cedar (vv. 9-10, 15-16), which signifies Christ’s humanity in resurrection, the resurrected Christ. The cherubim, entrance, and doors of the innermost sanctuary and the doorposts of the temple were made of olive wood (vv. 23, 31-33), which signifies Christ’s humanity in the Spirit of God, the anointed Christ. In contrast to these, the wood of 1 Corinthians 3:12 signifies the natural man in the flesh, untransformed humanity apart from divinity. In order to become materials for God’s building, we need to experience Christ in His death, His resurrection, and His Spirit. Only then will the “wood” of our humanity be renewed, uplifted, and overlaid with gold to be fit for the building of God.

Man is composed of three parts—spirit, soul, and body (1 Thes. 5:23). Although all the believers have been regenerated in their spirit (John 3:6; Rom. 8:16), it is very possible that much of their soul—their mind, emotion, and will—has not been renewed and transformed (Eph. 4:23; Rom. 12:2). As a result, the untransformed man, even the untransformed believer, is natural, bearing the nature and characteristic of the fallen man in Adam. Many of the Corinthian believers exemplified this condition, exalting the knowledge and philosophy of their Greek background and uplifting the wisdom of men. For this reason, Paul came to them purposely not according to excellence of speech or of wisdom but with the crucified Christ, not in persuasive words of wisdom, as was the way of the Greeks, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

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Paul said, “A soulish man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he is not able to know them because they are discerned spiritually. But the spiritual man discerns all things” (vv. 14-15). A soulish man is a natural man, one who allows his soul to dominate his entire being and who lives by his soul, ignoring his spirit, not using his spirit, and even behaving as if he did not have a spirit. Concerning those who are “soulish, having no spirit” (Jude 19), Alford says,

The ψυχή [soul] is the centre of the personal being, the “I” of each individual. It is in each man bound to the spirit, man’s higher part, and to the body, man’s lower part; drawn upwards by the one, downwards by the other. He who gives himself up to the lower appetites, is σαρκικός [fleshly]: he who by communion of his πνεῦμα [spirit] with God’s Spirit is employed in the higher aims of his being, is πνευματικός [spiritual]. He who rests midway, thinking only of self and self’s interests, whether animal or intellectual, is the ψυχικός [soulish], the selfish man, the man in whom the spirit is sunk and degraded into subordination to the subordinate ψυχή... These men have not indeed ceased to have πνεῦμα, as a part of their own tripartite nature: but they have ceased to possess it in any worthy sense: it is degraded beneath and under the power of the ψυχή, the personal life, so as to have no real vitality of its own. (4:540)

In contrast to the soulish man, those who would build the house of God with the precious materials of the Triune God—gold, silver, and precious stones—must live and walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 25) and walk according to the mingled spirit (Rom. 8:4), setting their mind on the mingled spirit (v. 6) and being indwelt by the pneumatic Christ as the Spirit who imparts life within us for us to put to death the practices of the body (vv. 9, 13). To this end we must also discern the spirit from the soul (Heb. 4:12), fanning our God-given spirit into flame (2 Tim. 1:6-7) and exercising our spirit so that all the parts of our soul come under the control of our spirit. Only in this way will our building work be worthy of the Lord’s approval at His judgment seat.

### Building with the Earthly and Demonic Life of the Soul

Concerning the expression of the natural man, James says, “This wisdom is not that which descends from above, but is earthly, soulish, demonic” (3:15). Again, Alford says,

The ψυχή is *that side* of the human soul, so to speak, which is *turned towards the flesh, the world, the devil*: so that the ψυχικός is necessarily in a measure σαρκικός..., also ἐπίγειος [earthly], and δαιμονιώδης [demonic]. (2:488)

Concerning *demonic* he says, “This word must not be figuratively taken...It betokens both the origin of this hypocritical wisdom..., and its character: it is from,—not God..., but—the devil,—and bears the character of its author” (4:310). The demonic nature of the unrenewed soul, which “bears the character of its author,” is revealed in Matthew 16:21-27. After Jesus prophesied concerning His death and resurrection, Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying,

God be merciful to You, Lord! This shall by no means happen to You!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men. (vv. 22-23)

Because Peter exercised his natural, unrenewed mentality, affection, and strength, Jesus addressed him as Satan. When we set our mind not on the things of God but on the things of men, in the eyes of the Lord we become one with Satan, even Satan himself, a stumbling block to the Lord on the way to fulfill God’s purpose. Following this exchange, Jesus told the disciples that they needed to deny the self, the embodiment of the fallen soul-life. We must be conformed to the death of Christ to have the self, natural man, flesh, distorted disposition, peculiarities, and personal preferences and tastes all crucified with Christ by the power of the resurrection of Christ.

Following this, Jesus said,

What shall a man be profited if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul-life? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul-life? For the Son of Man is to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will repay each man according to his doings. (vv. 26-27)

It is significant that the Lord concluded His speaking to Peter by mentioning the judgment and reward of the believers at His coming back. The Lord’s rewarding of His followers at His return will be according to whether they lose or save their soul. Those who deny their self, lose their soul-life, take the cross, and follow the Lord—as the builders with gold, silver, and precious stones—will be rewarded by Him at His return. On the other hand, those who build the church as the house of God with the natural life of the soul, that is, with earthly and demonic materials, will be judged by Him as the destroyers of His temple (1 Cor. 3:17). They will be saved, yet so as through fire, but they will lose their reward and suffer a certain punishment for building the house of God with worthless materials.

### Building according to the Pattern in the Mountain

After commanding Moses concerning the details of the

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tabernacle with its materials and furnishings, God said, "Let them make a sanctuary for Me that I may dwell in their midst; according to all that I show you, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, even so shall you make it" (Exo. 25:8-9). The most important thing in our spiritual work is a knowledge of the "pattern...in the mountain" (v. 40; Heb. 8:5), which is God's plan concerning Christ as the Head and the corporate Christ as the Body, the church, including many details of the experience of Christ for the church life. Watchman Nee writes concerning the building of the tabernacle, "It was not sufficient just to work with the materials chosen by God; there was also a definite charge concerning how to handle the material" (*Works* 9:288). Therefore, the believers' work of building with gold, silver, and precious stones is related not only to their personal, subjective experience of the Triune God, but also to the way of their work according to the vision, the revealed plan, of His divine building.

According to the pattern in the mountain, our building with the precious materials of the Triune God must take

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the church, the Body of Christ, and the New Jerusalem as its center, line, and goal for the accomplishment of God's eternal economy. Because our work must be in the Body, through the Body, and for the Body, all independent and individualistic works today come short of God's intention. Watchman Nee says,

A great lack among Christians today is that everyone wants to be an individual Christian...a Christian in an individual way. But God does not just want us to be good on an individual basis. He is after a corporate vessel that will destroy Satan and accomplish His plan...

God is after a corporate vessel, not individual vessels. He is not choosing a few zealous, consecrated ones to work for Him individually. Individual vessels cannot fulfill God's goal and plan. God has chosen the church, and He is after the church. Only the church as the corporate Christ can fulfill God's goal and plan. (*Mystery* 8, 15-16)

In Ezekiel 43:10 the Lord said, "You, O son of man, describe the house to the house of Israel, that they may feel humiliated because of their iniquities, and let them

measure the pattern." God charged Ezekiel to show the people of Israel the pattern of His house, because He intended to examine their living and conduct according to His house as a rule and pattern. Our behavior and conduct should be examined not only according to moral regulations and spiritual principles but also according to the house of God, as Paul says, "Let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor. 14:26). As we have seen, a few notable twentieth-century writers on the inner life, such as T. Austin-Sparks, ministered concerning the gold, silver, and precious stones that we gain in personal, private, and hidden experiences of the Lord. However, many of these spiritual ministers failed to see in a practical way that the "gold of the sanctuary" is for the sanctuary and must be brought to the sanctuary. Nee continues,

All the riches of the Son of God are deposited in the church. The riches of Christ are the riches of the Body of Christ. No individual could ever contain those riches, nor could a multitude of individuals...The church is not a heap of stones, nor a mass of unrelated individuals, but a "building" in which the stones are "fitted together" so that they become "a dwelling place of God in spirit"...In a lesser sense each individual believer is a temple of God, but only the corporate temple can contain all the riches of God...We need to be in the Body so that we can apprehend the riches which Christ has in His Body. (59-60)

As a wise master builder in his time (1 Cor. 3:10), Watchman Nee also saw that the universal Body of Christ must be expressed practically in local churches standing on the ground of oneness in each locality. He writes,

The Body of Christ is not only universal; it is also local. Every local church is the manifestation of the Body of Christ in that locality. All of the riches of Christ are vested in the local church...Hence, when we touch the local church, we touch the Body...Anyone who wants to live in the Body in a practical way has to be in the local churches. (61)

With those to whom life and reality are a matter of supreme importance, the temptation is to throw away the divine pattern of things...But God has not only revealed the truths that concern our inner life; He has also revealed the truths relating to the outward expression of that life. God prizes the inner reality, but He does not ignore its outward expression. (*Church Life* xiii)

This means that the work we carry out today must be in a practical, corporate coordination that is in the Body, by the Body, and for the Body, taking the Body of Christ as its goal in this age and the consummation of the Body, the New Jerusalem, as its goal in eternity. Our spirituality must be tested by the Body, that is, measured and checked according to the measurement of God's house.

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Our work must be governed, controlled, and directed by the Lord's up-to-date vision for the present age for the producing and building up of the Body of Christ consummating in the New Jerusalem. Moreover, our work must also be in the universal oneness of the Body of Christ and the blending and one accord among the practical, local expressions of the church under the unique New Testament ministry that ministers the up-to-date vision and leading of the Lord according to the apostles' teaching. Any ministry, even a spiritual ministry of the "gold of the sanctuary," that is not for the Body of Christ in this way is short of God's goal and is not according to the "pattern that was shown to you in the mountain" (Heb. 8:5). Only the work according to God's pattern, His plan for His goal, is the work of gold, silver, and precious stones that will be rewarded by the Lord.

### Committing the Iniquity of the Sanctuary

The work of God participated in and carried out through the believers must be according to the pattern in the mountain, that is, according to the vision, goal, and plan revealed by the Lord. As such, our work must have certain very important features. To do a work that does not bear these features is to commit the "iniquity of the sanctuary" (Num. 18:1), the particular sin committed not by the believers in their common daily life but by a worker in God's work. First, the initiation of God's work must be according to His will (Matt. 15:13; 1 Cor. 8:6). Nee says,

Our sins toward God are of two kinds: one is rebellion and the other is presumption. When God tells you to do something, and contrary to His wishes, you do not obey but do what He does not want, that is a sin of rebellion...The Bible not only tells us that rebellion is a sin, but that presumption and rashness are also sins. When we begin a work that God has not instructed us to do, we are committing a sin of presumption...Acting outside of God is the sin of presumption...What we see today is that there are more volunteers than those who are called. Many can only say, "I have come," but not, "I have been sent." Therefore, we see that God's work is overcast with spiritual death. (*Works* 9:289-290)

Second, the advance of God's work must also be according to His power (Phil. 3:10). Any work that does not have its initiation in God's heart and will and its advance in God's power is from the natural, soulish life, the life of the regenerated but untransformed believer. Nee continues,

If a person does not inquire concerning what is God's will, God's time, and God's way, then, even if his work is the best work, it is merely done according to the enthusiasm of his soulish life. Many of God's children...do not realize that God has no pleasure in anything that comes

from the natural life, no matter how good its motive, how noble its goal, and how impressive its result. God takes no pleasure because it does not originate from His will, and, therefore, is not fitted for His use. They also do not realize that God does not supply His power for any work which does not come out of His will. On the contrary, they assume that their zeal, tone, emotion, strength, and tears for the work are the result of God's strengthening power. Little do they realize that at such times they are actually drawing on the power of their natural life to supply the work of their natural life. (9:292)

Lastly, the result of God's work must be for His glory (John 7:17-18; Eph. 3:21). To usurp and steal God's glory is to commit the iniquity of the sanctuary. No work that is truly of gold, silver, and precious stones can be initiated by ourselves, be carried out by our own power, or result in our own glory.

### Strange Fire and the Judgment of Fire from Jehovah

Leviticus 10:1-2 says,

Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in them and laid incense on it, and they presented strange fire before Jehovah, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from before Jehovah and consumed them, and they died before Jehovah.

The strange fire offered by Nadab and Abihu came not from the altar, that is, from God. Instead, it came from an earthen source, that is, from man. The altar is a type of the cross, and the offering of the incense is a matter of our service before God. Thus, strange fire signifies man's natural enthusiasm, natural affection, natural strength, and natural ability offered to God. This is similar to the case of Uzzah, who touched the Ark of God with his natural hand, brought in God's anger, and suffered death (2 Sam. 6:1-7). In touching the divine things, we need to forsake the self and apply the cross to our natural life. Otherwise, our careless touching of the holy things of God will bring in spiritual deadness and may even result in physical death as a judgment from the holy God (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 11:27-32; 1 John 5:16). Only when the wisdom, opinion, ability, enthusiasm, expectation, and longings of the self and natural life have been dealt with by the cross are we ready to serve as priests before God in His move.

It is of the utmost importance in our building of the house of God that we not only use the proper precious materials but also that we handle them in the way demanded by God. First Peter 5:2 says, "Shepherd the flock of God among you, overseeing not under compulsion but willingly, according to God." To shepherd



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according to God is to serve the flock of God according to God's nature, desire, way, and glory, not according to man's preference, interest, and purpose. The nature of God must be the "golden street" of our work, His desire the initiation of our work, His way the advance of our work, and His glory the result of our work. Thus, to work according to God's nature, desire, way, and glory is to build the house of God with the gold of the New Jerusalem. On the other hand, to work according to man's preference, interest, and purpose is to build with the worthless and combustible materials of wood, grass, and stubble. At the Lord's coming, those who faithfully serve the allotments of God will be rewarded by the Chief Shepherd with a crown of glory, a portion of the glory for the overcomers' enjoyment in the manifestation of the kingdom of God and Christ (vv. 3-4; 2 Pet. 1:11). However, any work carried out for God that is not according to God—initiated by Him, passing through the cross, carried out by His power, and resulting in His glory—will be judged as strange fire, as the iniquity of the sanctuary, and as wood, grass, and stubble. Clearly alluding to 1 Corinthians 3:15, Watchman Nee speaks of the burning of the believers' work and their consequent punishment at the judgment seat of Christ:

If we have not received a command from Him but work presumptuously, He cannot accept us and cannot use us; consequently, our work will certainly be burned...God does not consider something good merely because our intention is good. Our intention may be good, but if we act presumptuously, God will still punish us for the presumptuous sin...The numerous works that come out of strange fire will be consumed before the judgment seat. (9:294, 296)

There are three results or punishments for the iniquity of the sanctuary. First, there is a loss of the power of life; a man becomes stale. Second, there is the experience of spiritual death; there may even be sicknesses or physical death...Third, there will be the judgment at the judgment seat. I have the deep sense that at the judgment seat no sin will be greater than the iniquity of the sanctuary. (42:362)

### The Destroyers of God's Building

In 1 Corinthians 3:17 Paul says, "If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him." *Destroy* (φθεῖρω), used twice in this verse, denotes corruption unto destruction, "to destroy by means of corrupting, and so bringing into a worse state" (Vine, *Dictionary* 244); hence, to ruin, corrupt, defile, or mar. In the moral sense, it denotes not utter destruction or annihilation but a dissolution through defilement, corruption, or depravity, as in 15:33, which says, "Evil companionships corrupt good morals." The same verb is used in 2 Corinthians 11:3, in

which the believers' thoughts toward Christ are corrupted by the seduction of the undermining preaching of the Judaizers as ministers of Satan; in Ephesians 4:22, in which the old man is being corrupted according to the lusts of the deceit; in 2 Peter 2:12 and Jude 10, in which false teachers and heretical apostates are destroyed by the same corruption with which they corrupt others; and in Revelation 19:2, in which the great harlot, Babylon, corrupts the earth with her fornication. The noun form (φθορά) is used for the fallen state of the old creation under the curse, in contrast to glory (Rom. 8:21); for the issue of the fulfillment of the purposes of the flesh, in contrast to eternal life (Gal. 6:8); and for the corruption of the world in the lust of the flesh, in contrast to the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4; 2:12, 19).

Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 is in direct parallel to his immediately preceding words in verses 9 through 15. The temple of God in verses 16 and 17 is the explanation of God's building in verse 9. God's building is not an ordinary building; it is the sanctuary of the holy God, the temple in which the Spirit of God dwells (6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22). In addition, to destroy the temple of God in 1 Corinthians 3:17 is parallel to building with the worthless materials of wood, grass, and stubble, as described in verse 12. This refers to certain Jewish believers, for example, who attempted to build the church with elements of Judaism, and to certain Greek believers, who endeavored to bring philosophical elements into the building. All this tended to ruin, corrupt, defile, and mar the temple of God, that is, to destroy it.

According to the New Testament there are seven kinds of destroyers of God's building (Lee, *Secret* 61-62). The destroyers of the divine building are those who blow the wind of divisive teachings by stressing things other than the central teaching concerning God's economy (Eph. 4:14; 1 Tim. 1:3-4). The central line of God's economy concerns the church for the producing of the Body of Christ to consummate the New Jerusalem. Teaching different things rather than the unique ministry of God's economy tears down God's building and annuls God's economy. The destroyers of the divine building are also those who preach and teach heresies (2 Pet. 2:1; 2 John 7-11), particularly concerning the person of the Lord in His deity, His incarnation by divine conception, and His work of redemption. They are also those who are factious, sectarian (Titus 3:10), causing divisions by forming parties in the church according to their own opinions and "self-chosen doctrines" (Alford 4:402). Divisions and sects, parties, are works of the flesh, and "those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21). The destroyers of the divine building are those who "make divisions and causes of stumbling" contrary to the teaching of the apostles, which is centered on Christ and the

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church, that is, on the economy of God (Rom. 16:17; Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; 6:3, Prov. 6:16, 19b). They are also those who are ambitious for position, like the self-exalting and domineering Diotrephes, who loved to be first among the saints (3 John 9; cf. Matt. 20:25-27; 23:6-11). To go beyond the teaching of Christ (2 John 9) is a matter of intellectual arrogance and damages the believers' faith in the divine reality, and to strive to be the first in the work of the Lord according to hidden ambition is a matter of self-exaltation and frustrates the believers' work in God's move. These two evils are used by God's enemy, Satan, to execute his evil plot against God's economy. Finally, the destroyers of the divine building are those who are wolves, not sparing the flock (Acts 20:29), and they are those who speak perverted things to draw away the believers after them (v. 30).

### God's Governmental Discipline on the Destroyers of His Building

Just as the temple of God in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 17 is in parallel to and explains the building in verses 9 through 12, and destroying the temple is parallel to building with worthless materials, to be destroyed through God's governmental discipline in verse 17 is a further explanation of suffering loss in verse 15. Although some resist recognizing the latter parallel, refusing to admit that genuine believers can be "destroyed," it is in logical accord with and corollary to the first two parallels. C. A. Coates says, referring strictly to believers in a local church,

We cannot stand in relation to the local assembly without introducing something. Now, what kind of elements are we introducing to the local assembly? Are we bringing in such things as wood and grass and straw? Or are we bringing in gold and silver and precious stones...When we come to the meetings we are either bringing wood, grass or straw, or gold and silver and precious stones. We are either bringing something to detract from the adornment or something that will add to it. (133-134)

However, he then adds,

I do not suppose any of us would be guilty of corrupting the temple of God. That is another thing...I do not suppose there is anyone here who would dare to think of doing that; but then, we may bring wood, grass and straw! (134)

The distinction between building with worthless materials and destroying the temple of God is artificial.<sup>2</sup> Coates very thoroughly applies the allegory of the adornment of the temple to the building up of the church with the proper, divine materials:

We must not think of the assembly as a bare structure; it

is to be adorned, and every one of us is responsible for the adornment of the temple. We read that Solomon overlaid the house with precious stones for beauty (2 Chron. 3:6); it was adorned. The thought of the temple is introduced collectively in this chapter [1 Cor. 3] to put us on the line of adorning the local company where we are with things that have value in the sight of God...[This] applies in principle to every brother and sister. What are we bringing? Is it a detraction from the holiness and glory of the temple or is it some addition to it? (133, 135)

**I**t is not consistent to suppose that believers can adorn the temple with divine things but that they cannot corrupt it with worthless things, the "worldly or the natural or the fleshly in any form" as Coates defines them (134). The claim that to detract from the holiness of the temple is different from destroying the temple is a concept born of the unwillingness to admit that genuine believers, regenerated in their spirit with the Spirit of God yet untransformed in their soul and natural in their ways, may not only lose their reward but also suffer God's governmental discipline for a work that corrupts, ruins, defiles, and mars the church of God. Joseph H. Thayer reports that in the thought of the Jews, "the temple was corrupted, or 'destroyed', when any one defiled or in the slightest degree damaged anything in it, or if its guardians neglected their duties" (652). Since the temple of God, the church, is holy, the materials, the ways, and the efforts by which we build it also must be holy, corresponding with God's nature, Christ's redemption, and the Spirit's transformation. To use any doctrine that differs from the fundamental teachings of the apostles or any ways and efforts that contradict God's nature, Christ's redemptive work, and the Spirit's transforming work is to corrupt, ruin, defile, mar, and destroy the church of God. If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him. This implies at least the punishment unveiled in verse 15. All those who have corrupted, ruined, defiled, and marred the church of God by their heretical doctrines, divisive teachings, worldly ways, and natural efforts in building will be judged by fire, have their works consumed, and suffer God's punishment. This is a sober warning to all believers, and it is the word of righteousness in the New Testament.

*by John Campbell*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Genesis 2 provides the blueprint for God's work of building according to His eternal purpose, and Revelation 21 portrays the ultimate fulfillment of God's purpose in eternity. Therefore, in these two passages, pearl, or bdellium, is mentioned rather than silver, which bespeaks man's need of redemption after the fall.

<sup>2</sup>It is unnecessary and misleading to claim that Paul's intensification of language in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 17 signals a

change in subject concerning the persons and activities spoken of in the preceding verses. Frederic Godet attributes the sharpening of Paul's terminology—from a building to the temple, from building badly to destroying, and from suffering loss to destruction—to the emotion and gravity that possessed Paul in the progress of composing this chapter (192). As William Barclay notes, it is not uncharacteristic that “the march of Paul's prose suddenly takes wings and becomes a lyric of passion and poetry” (35). Paul's theme is one and the same throughout the entire chapter.

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