

We also read parts of Nehemiah 3 and Matthew 7:24-27.

Paul continues to write about his leadership and apostleship, but that is not our focus today. My leadership in this church is not the issue.

Paul uses three different images in our chapter.

First an image about maturity (verses 1-4). When a person grows up, they need no more baby milk; they are supposed to eat solid food. You sometimes hear people say: "I did not get much out of church today." That is an immature thing to say. It is selfish, it shows immaturity. You don't just go to church to gain something. Growing up means digging in, serving, pouring your life into others, making your contribution to the church. And a church service is primarily about worshipping God.

The second image Paul uses is that of planting and watering. He compares the church to a plant which needs to be fed. This image is still about leadership so we will leave it.

The third image (in verses 10-15) is that of a building and it is about all of us. We are each building the church of Christ – or not as the case might be. There are three things to say about this metaphor:

1. The right foundation is key to success, as we saw in the clip and as we heard in Matthew 7:24-27. In this church we spoke about our foundation last week, when Hetty preached about Jesus and the cross. I hope you still remember that.

By the way, Nehemiah 3 has similarities with our passage but also differences. In that story, each person is helping, building the city wall. This is good, but the quality of the materials they use is not considered. It's an emergency repair in desperate times. It is the effort of each that is to be applauded.

2. This passage in 1 Corinthians is about the quality of the work. It says: 'Build well!'

- Paul mentions worthless materials, such as wood, hay or straw, that won't survive a fire. These should not be used. Examples of such materials in our time would be wrong ideas about Jesus, a wrong Bible translation, sectarian books, selfishness, judgementalism and indifference.

Useless buildings that people might be trying to build include their pension pots, their lists of possessions and their reputation in the world.

- Paul encourages us to use valuable materials, such as gold, silver or jewels, that will survive a fire. These will make for a beautiful church. Of course Paul does not mean a physical church building – these did not even yet exist. He means the fellowship, the kingdom of God! Such materials are truth, mercy, humility, simplicity, wisdom, generosity and passion for justice.

Do note that the fire is only a picture for the troubles that a church might experience and for the judgement on the last day. Paul is not saying that there will be literal fire. So this is not a reason to believe in a purgatory! It does tell us that at the end of time there will be judgement, though.

3. Paul clearly thinks about rewards in 'heaven', on the new earth. To be sure, all believers are justified, declared righteous; God loves us all. But at various place in the Bible we see that there will be distinctions and rewards in the afterlife. In Jesus' parable (Luke 19) he speaks about ruling over ten cities or over five cities; or not getting anything at all! Clearly the afterlife still holds many surprises for us.

Paul's metaphor of building tells us that a life that is successful in the eyes of the world might be a failure in God's eyes, and vice versa. What matters is what you contribute to the church,

to the kingdom of God. Applause on earth (as is craved by sporters and stars) is useless from an eternal perspective. Let us live in such a way that Jesus can say to us: 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things.' (Matthew 25:21)

Are you building God's church? God's Kingdom? How? Are you praying? You all can do that! Are you supporting the leadership? Will your work be fireproof?