

HOW ARE THE APOSTLES JUDGED? A NOTE ON 1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-15

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Faced with a young, strife-ridden church that has become divided into several factions loyal to various apostolic figures (1 Cor 1:10-3:4) the apostle Paul explains the proper role of the apostle in accomplishing his God-given ministry (3:5-9) and affirms that the work of each apostle will be judged (3:10-15). To illustrate the relationship of the apostle to the church, Paul develops two metaphors, one agricultural (3:6-8) and the other architectural (3:10-15). Whereas both metaphors illustrate how the apostles contribute to each other's work, the second metaphor takes up the question of how this apostolic work is to be evaluated.

Viewed against the background of party loyalties and the unwholesome emphasis on *sophia* (which is very likely the catchword of Apollos and his followers), Paul's use of *blepetō* (3:10b) sets the tone of warning for the passage. According to the building metaphor, Paul has laid the foundation of Christ (3:10-11) upon which another (presumably Apollos) builds (3:10b). The quality of each apostle's work will be disclosed by a test of fire at the "Day" (3:13). Work that is good (described metaphorically as precious metals and gems—nonflammable materials) will survive and become the basis of reward (3:12-14). Work that is bad (described as wood, hay and straw—flammable materials) will be burned and so will provide no reward (3:12, 15a). H. Conzelmann has rightly noted that "we have not the scene of the last judgment, but the process of disclosure."¹ In a recent study C. W. Fishburne has argued that 1 Cor 3:10-15 is best understood against the *Testament of Abraham* 13.² He has pointed out that much of the vocabulary of 1 Cor 3:13-15 is found in the *Testament of Abraham* and that Paul appears to be echoing this pseudepigraphal writing.³ However, in 1 Cor 3:15b Paul deviates from the theology of the *Testament of Abraham* by affirming that even though a man's work is consumed by the fire he is nevertheless spared.⁴ Fishburne states: "In Paul . . . the trial of works by fire is not to determine the eternal destiny of a human soul; rather, it serves to be a *test of the works of the leaders of the church,*

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¹H. Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 76.

²C. W. Fishburne, "1 Corinthians 3:10-15 and the Testament of Abraham," *NTS* 17 (1970) 109-115.

³*Ibid.*, p. 110. Noteworthy parallels would include *dokimazein*, *ergon*, *pyr*, *ei tinos*, and *katakaiein*.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 114-115. On the phrase "he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" see Conzelmann, *Commentary* 76-77.

to determine whether or not they shall receive rewards.”⁵

In a similar passage, and one that is often related to 1 Cor 3:10-15, Paul states that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body” (2 Cor 5:10 *RSV*). In 2 Corinthians 1-5 the first person plural pronoun almost always refers to the apostle and his fellow missionaries, while the second person plural refers to the Corinthian Christians. However, in the case of 2 Cor 5:10 *pantas hēmas* must refer to all Christians and not to “all of us apostles.”⁶ In a context in which the apostle discusses death (5:1-10)⁷ Paul states that as long as he is alive his aim is to please the Lord (5:9) because he, as well as all others, must appear before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account (5:10). Although this passage is similar, it is not at all certain that the trial of works by fire described in 1 Cor 3:10-15 is the same as the judgment before Christ. How do the two passages relate?

The two eschatological terms, “fire” and “Day” (1 Cor 3:13), appear together in 2 Thess 1:7-8, where Christ is depicted as descending “with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (*RSV*).⁸ The theme of eschatological catastrophe at the time of the Day of the Lord also appears in 1 Thess 5:2-3. Here the implication is that the Day of the Lord will be a time of testing for all, believers and unbelievers alike. Doubtless at the time of his writing the Thessalonian epistles, and 1 Corinthians two years or so later, Paul anticipated that these eschatological events would take place during his life, for he includes himself among those who will be alive at the time of Christ’s *parousia* and rapture of the Church (cf. 1 Thess 4:13-17). Whereas all believers must appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10), the quality of the apostles’ work will have already been revealed during the eschatological time of violent persecution and tribulation that precedes Christ’s return and judgment and that, from Paul’s perspective, would soon be upon the infant Church. This fiery trial described in 1 Cor 3:10-15 will test the quality of each apostle’s work and will establish the basis on which he himself will be judged, along with all other believers. Therefore 1 Cor 3:10-15 describes the severe testing of the churches during the Day of the Lord (a time that is brought to a close by an avenging Christ, according to 2 Thess 1:6-10), while 2 Cor 5:10 speaks of the appearance of the saints before the judgment seat of Christ.

⁵Fishburne, “1 Corinthians 3:10-15” 114 (italics mine).

⁶R. Bultmann, *Der Zweite Brief an die Korinther* (ed. E. Dinkler; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1976) 145: “Natürlich nicht ‘wir Apostel alle,’ sondern alle Menschen überhaupt.” Also J. Héring, *The Second Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth, 1967) 39-40.

⁷See the recent discussions of M. J. Harris, “Paul’s View of Death in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10,” *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 317-328; L. Cranford, “A New Look at 2 Corinthians 5:1-10,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 19 (1976) 95-100.

⁸Although the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians is disputed, it nevertheless bears important witness to Pauline eschatology. For a recent discussion of the authorship of the epistle see J. A. Bailey, “Who Wrote II Thessalonians?,” *NTS* 25 (1978) 131-145.