

1 Corinthians 3:21

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[0 : 00] We shall turn again to 1 Corinthians chapter 3, and our text is verse 21. Therefore let no man glory in men, for all things are yours.

And those words especially, all things are yours. Now I suppose that many of you are aware of the concept of management by objective as one of the great in concepts and in phrases of current economic thinking.

And one could certainly say that Jesus Christ has given to his own church on earth very clear objectives and very clear statements of those objectives.

And I think that we ought ourselves to be more conscious of the objectives than we ordinarily are. When we reflect upon the objectives, we find that in many ways they are quite staggering.

There is the objective, for example, of survival. That having done all, we should stand. Stand, says the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6.

[1 : 48] And having done all, stand. Stand, and that is one of the Lord's objectives for his own community, that we should survive. We should withstand every pressure and every destructive force.

And at the end, be standing, standing survivors after every kind of crisis. The Lord also lays down that it's one of our objectives to prevent this world rotting.

He says to us that we are the salt of the earth. And that means that our function is at one level to prevent the world putrefying in a moral and spiritual sense.

And that implies that we ourselves, of course, are involved in the world and interacting with its various elements and its various components to prevent this kind of putrefaction.

And then equally, Christ said, we're supposed to be the light of the world. We're supposed to bring gospel truth and gospel purity and gospel optimism and hope into the darkness of our own human condition.

[3 : 06] And maybe above all, the Lord has told us to go forth with the gospel to all the nations. Go, ye, therefore, and preach this gospel.

Preach the good news to every creature. And that maybe is the umbrella objective of the Church of God.

And I think that sometimes it will be salutary for us to ask ourselves to what extent we are meeting the Lord's objectives.

Do we as a congregation sit down and remind ourselves of what the objectives are? And then go on to ask ourselves, are we making any progress towards those objectives?

To what extent are we surviving? To what extent are we preventing the world from putrefying? To what extent do we spread the light of the gospel in the area of our own influence?

[4 : 16] And to what extent do we carry the word of God to all the nations and the good news to every creature? And yet, even as we ponder those objectives, we are also brought up against the terrible problem of the inadequacy of our own resources.

How can we possibly meet the challenge of those mandates? And the challenge of those directives when our resources are so slender?

And Paul was indeed very conscious of this fact as he wrote to the church at Corinth. He reminds them that their gospel is a foolish gospel.

It isn't a gospel consisting of the world's wisdom. It is a gospel with folly at its very heart. And he is also conscious of their own very inauspicious social background.

There are very, very few mighty, very, very few wise, very, very few noble among them. They are very, very ordinary in their background, in their wealth and resources, in their intellectual capacity.

[5 : 42] They seem totally inadequate for this burden which God has laid upon them. And then, to make the picture even darker, the apostle reminds them of the inadequacy of their own discipleship. I couldn't resist why to you as unto spiritual men, but as unto carnal men, even as unto babes and Christ.

Here is a very typical Christian church. A church which has the gospel which is folly. A church conspicuously lacking in all that the world admires.

But more tragically still, a church that is deficient in the quality of its own discipleship. And that's why, for a moment, I want us to ponder this great correlation, this juxtaposition.

The way we have the mighty fact of the objectives that God proposes. And yet, the terrible inadequacy of the people to whom he does propose the objectives.

[7 : 06] We have to overcome the world. And yet, we lack every quality that the world admires. We have to overcome the world.

And yet, even our discipleship is so inadequate. And it's at that very point that the apostle brings in this great principle, all things are yours.

Just as we ponder for ourselves, our own inadequacy, and the impossibility of our fulfilling God's mandates, or attaining to God's objectives.

Just as we become depressed about the fewness, and very, very ordinariness of our own gifts, at that very point, at that very point, we see, Paul says, that all things are ours.

And he's asking us to pick yourselves off the floor and to face those objectives that God has given to us. I want for a moment tonight to reflect upon what Paul means by those all things.

[8 : 24] All things are ours. What does he put content-wise into that phrase? He's reminding us, first of all, that all spiritual gifts are ours.

He puts it this way, Paul or Apollos or Cephas. All of these are yours. Remember the problem Paul had at Corinth.

There was division. There was faction. There were three great parties. One said, we are Apollos' party.

One said, we are Paul's party. One said, we are Peter's party. They were boasting that they had behind them the gifts of those particular leaders.

And they felt strong and bold and arrogant and confident in the resources of these individual teachers. And the apostle says to them, why are you glorying in men?

[9 : 33] Why are you glorying in one man? Why are you glorying in your own party leader? Do you not realize that all of these men belong to the whole community?

that all of you can say, Paul is ours and Apollos and Cephas. All of those teachers, all of these gifts, belonging equally to the whole church of God.

Not to one group or to one sect, but to the whole community. Apollos, we are told, was an eloquent man, mighty in scriptures.

And the apostle says, he belongs to the whole church. Peter was a man of immense zeal and courage.

A man to whom God had given a very profound vision of his own glory. And there again, Paul says, he doesn't belong to one party. He belongs to the whole church.

[10 : 37] Similarly, with regard to Paul himself, with all his gifts, he belongs to the whole church. Now as we face for ourselves the mandates that God has given us in our own time and place, we are to remind ourselves that behind us there is that whole wealth of resource, that whole ministry represented by Paul, Apollos and Cephas.

behind us all the spiritual gifts. In other words, there is an ongoing prophetic ministry, an ongoing apostolic ministry.

That ministry has never ceased. Even though we live in a post-Pentecost situation, yet the apostles, Paul and Peter, are still ministering to us.

But my real concern is this, that we are so often tempted to confine our own resources within the narrow limits of our own tradition.

We are so inclined to say, as these mentioned at Corinth, John Calvin is ours, and Thomas Chalmers is ours, or John Kennedy is ours.

[12 : 04] And of course, we do rejoice in the gifts given to us in those great men. But the apostles are saying, why do you glory in these?

Do you not realize that not only is Kennedy yours, but so too is every gift and every teacher and every leader ever given by God to his church.

And I believe that one of our problems as a church is the narrowness of our own foundations, the narrowness of the historical perspective that we ourselves cultivate.

we should see ourselves as part of a great Catholic tradition that goes away back to the Apostle Paul and away back into all the riches of the early church so that men like Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, these men are ours.

Men like Luther are ours, men like Calvin are ours, men like John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, these men are ours. And today all that God made these men should be feeding into the life stream of this congregation.

[13 : 36] We should see and remind ourselves that we did not come into existence in 1900, that our roots did not lie at all in the Scottish Highlands, that Paul, Apollos, Cathos, Tertullian, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, these men are ours.

And that all the insight and all the wisdom and all the zeal that these men had, these are ours to draw. And I do wish often that we could get back beyond the narrow vision within which we are often imprisoned.

I'm trying to see the breadth of the stream that is carrying us along. And then the apostle goes on to mention this. History says is ours.

All those spiritual gifts are ours. And then again, history is ours. He says things present or things to come, these are ours.

the great process of unfolding events. Now those events often seem to be quite meaningless. There seems to be no pattern, to be no method, to be no purpose or plan of any kind whatsoever.

[14 : 59] We live in a world that is full of convulsions, full of confusion, full of tragedy, full of calamity, full of apocalyptic disaster.

And so often there is only darkness and emptiness. And it's so tempting to say, as Henry Ford said, history is bunk. Or to say with H.E.L.

Fisher, the only thing that men learn from history is that men learn nothing from history. There is a terrible pessimism as to the course upon which this world is moving.

there is no way that that kind of pessimism as to historical process can live in the light of the word of God. Because according to the Bible history is not bulk.

According to the Bible history is full of lessons and full of teaching and it is full of meaning because God himself is in it.

[16 : 11] God is behind it. God is in control of it. And because God is in control, the apostle can say all things are used, things present and things to come.

In other words, according to scriptures, God is present at the beginning of history. And God is present in the middle of history. And God is present at the end of history.

I'll admit it down to the New Testament where we find it brought home to us so so clearly that the lamb is in the midst of the throne.

Christ in the book of Revelation is the one who opens God's book of history and to break or loses the seals thereof.

In other words, every event as it unfolds unfolds by his decision unfolds in the sequence that he decides unfolds in the context that he has chosen.

[17 : 23] And because of that Paul can say things present are yours and things to come are yours because they are all happening by decision and by ordination of the Lord who is our Savior.

We have the same thing brought home to us in the Great Commission where Christ says to us, all authority is mine in heaven and in earth. History itself is under authority and the authority it is under is the authority of the Lamb of God and in him it's under the authority of grace and under the authority of redemptive love.

Christ can move heaven and earth for his people and Christ does move heaven and earth for his people. He is in total control of every physical movement, of every human decision, of every spiritual occurrence.

Life is under his authority. Death is under his authority. Political processes are under his authority. Every individual human decision is under his authority.

Every natural collision, every natural occurrence, every movement, whether great or small, lies under the regime of the Savior.

[18 : 58] And that is why, again, Paul can say, God works all things together for good to them that love him. Does the city of Amini, to the crusades of Amini, to the terrible Muslim invasions of the Middle Ages, that swamped whole areas of Christianity, do those have a meaning?

To the great wars of this bloody century, do they have a meaning? Yes, he says, God is working all things together for good.

Does the nuclear technology of the 20th century, with all the problems it creates and all the anxiety it precipitates and all the terror that it brings along with it?

Is that adrift? Is that erratic? Is that out of control? It cannot be. All things are ours.

This history, with its unfolding tragedies, with its ups and downs, its discoveries, its lives, its deaths, its wars, its plagues, its famines, these things lie subject to the authority of Jesus Christ.

[20 : 28] And they are being bent by him. They are being bent so that they bear on his own great purpose the salvation of the world through his church.

They are being bent towards those objectives that he has chosen and has in fact announced for his own people. So as we try to survive, as we try to prevent the world from rotting, as we try to fill the world with the light of the gospel, behind us there is the Lord of history, the Christ who works all things together for our good.

world. And then he adds a third thing and that is this. The world itself he says is ours. Paul, Apollos and Cephas, all those spiritual gifts these are ours.

History with things present and things to come, that is ours. And the world is ours. The word for word here is the word cosmos with its relations with the word cosmetics and a large part of the idea is the emphasis on the ordered beauty of the universe in which God has placed us.

The cosmos in its order, the cosmos in its beauty, that cosmos he says is ours. It is for us.

[22 : 03] As we pursue our objectives, we have all the spiritual gifts behind us. We have history behind us. And he says we have the world behind us.

We have the very structure of the universe itself behind us. The very shape of the cosmos both as a macrocosm and as a microcosm.

The world in its innermost reality, in its chemical and physical structures, in all the physical laws, that it obeys, that world that we can describe artistically as a world of unsurpassable beauty, and that world that we can describe mathematically as a world of mind-boggling order and logic in all its complexity, that world with its beauty, that world with its mathematical exactitude, that world with its element, its proportion of controlled probability and indeterminacy, that world in the very depths of its physical qualities, that world is ours.

now I think that that is something that maybe we evangelicals have not been anything like, sufficiently aware of, and I think that to a quite unacceptable degree, we are afraid of the world, we are afraid often of what the next scientific discovery may bring to light, to shake your faith, we are afraid of technology, and what terrible disruptive force it may next unleash, and it seems to me terribly important for us to get back to the principle that Paul has here, look, the world is huge, one of the great things that the Christian faith does, is that it de-demonizes the universe, it de-satanizes it, if you live in a primitive or polytheistic religious environment, then the world is demonic, it has to be manipulated by religious rights, and by witch doctors and one thing or another, but in the Christian faith, the world has been de-demonized, and it has been de-demonized in one of the basic affirmations of Christianity, you have it in the Apostles Creed in this form, I believe in God the Father, Almighty Maker of Heaven and Earth, in other words, God the Father is the Almighty Maker of Heaven and Earth, Earth, it's our Father's universe, it's not a demonic universe, it's not going to leap at us maliciously and bite us, or destroy us, God, our Father made it, and so long as we are in this cosmos, in this universe, we are in an environment which our Father created, and I'm almost asking, that we look at it from a parental point of view, how we ourselves provide for our children safe, recreational, and educative environments, and I'm saying that

[26 : 04] God could not do less than provide for his children safe, recreative, and educative environments, and wherever I am in this universe, I'm in my Father's word, it is demonized in the very doctrine of creation itself, and then as almost a luxury, an intensification of my comfort, to give me super abundant comfort, I am told that not only was it made by God the Father, but it was made by Christ, the eternal word, without him was not anything made that was made, and so it's Christ's world, the Savior, the Lamb of God, put it together, it is therefore logical with his launching, it is an entire harmony with his character, as the one in whom God's love became incarnate, and the one who is full of grace, and of truth, and I'm not afraid of it,

I think it's terribly important, not to be afraid of it, it's terribly important to remind ourselves that the evangelical tradition, is not an anti-scientific one, that on the contrary, science was born in evangelicalism, it was born in the vision of God as creator, of the universe as created, as harmonious, as beautiful, as tame, as manageable, almost a universe that was predictable within the covenant of God himself, and I want tonight that you should feel utterly and totally at peace with this world itself, with the cosmos, with the environment in which God has placed you, you know, I've said its very structures are ours, it has been fashioned, I believe, with a view to our salvation, it has been fashioned,

I believe, with a view to facilitating the fulfillment of the church's mandates and the church's objectives, I believe that because it's ours, it has great lessons to teach us, us, we have seen recently how God's own glorious attributes are revealed in the things that are made, we have been led by the Lord himself to look at the birds and look at the lilies of the field, because of the great lessons that they have to teach us, and that's partly what Paul means when he says to us, that the universe is ours, it's there to teach us great lessons about God's power, God's Godhead, and God's care, and God's providential meeting of all our needs, it is also there in a sense that it is itself designed to meet our needs, what I mean is that if you go back to Genesis 1, we are told by God that the he has given us all these things for food, we pray in the Lord's prayer, give us this day our daily bread, why?

So that we may hallow thy name and do thy will, and the cosmos has been so made by God, that it provides man with a sustenance that is indispensable if we are to fulfill the will of God.

So the universe teaches us, and the universe feeds us. But I'm coming back to something more basic still, that the world is there with all its laws and all its potential to be used for the furtherance of the gospel.

[30 : 26] it is structured to facilitate the proclamation of the word of God.

And I think that it is terribly important for us to try to see that God has given us modern technology, not for our own entertainment or for the purposes of war, but God has given that technology in order to enable us to spread the word of the gospel.

one of the great reasons why the reformation spread so rapidly was that at that very time God had given to the church the printing press.

Now that was very modern technology. That was mind-boggling to the end of that period. And the church had the wisdom to use that technology boldly and creatively.

Now we have seen in our generation tremendous advances in the technology of communication in that sphere more than in any other sphere.

[31 : 46] We forget even when we reflect often on nuclear technology that the advances are not so much in the area of fission or fusion as in the improvement of delivery vehicles.

That again is part of the whole communications technology. And the question I'm asking is how keen we are and how alert we are to the possibility of baptizing that technology into the gospel of Christ.

We are only discovering potencies that God himself put into the universe. And God put them there for us so that we might exploit them whether it's radio or television or video whatever it may be that we should find ways of baptizing that technology with all its potential to baptize it into the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

All things are used. we have behind us Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. We have behind us all the logic of human history.

We have behind us the very structure of the universe itself. truth. I'm going to add to that two things more.

[33 : 20] I'll do so very briefly. One of these is that God has given to us the truth. I'm asking all the time, what resources has God given to us to fulfill the mandates?

And I'm saying now God has given us the truth. If we go back to Matthew 11, we find Christ saying to the Father, or of the Father, all things are given to me by my Father.

And that was basically to say that God had given him the truth. And that truth, Christ has given to the church, which is the pillar and the ground of the truth.

God and the truth. And I sometimes think that we are to remind ourselves that may be our most precious position. What does the church have?

It has the truth. The truth which the Father gave to Christ, which Christ gave to the church, and we have that. That is the truth that liberates.

[34 : 30] liberates, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. It's a truth that sanctifies, sanctifies through the truth.

It's a truth that regenerates, because men are born again by the word of God that lives and abides forever. It is the truth that gives the church its authority.

It has the authority of truth. Its word will commend itself to the human conscience, and to the human mind, to the human sense of logic, because it is truth itself.

One of the most memorable testimonies I ever heard, when, with regard to why people become Christians, was that of a young student who said quite simply, I became a Christian because I saw that Christianity was true.

And that was all. I think so often that we want extra reasons, we want some emotional experience, we want some ecstatic moment, we want some trauma, some thrill.

[35 : 52] people. But surely, if it's true, then it commands, it deserves instant allegiance.

one thing more, God has given to us the Holy Spirit. He has given to us Paul, Apollos, Cephas, he has given to us history, given to us the world, given to us the truth, given to us God himself as present with us.

I'm just going to say this, that if we go back into the Old Testament, we find the church praying to God for one great thing, for his presence. Oh, that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might bow down at thy presence.

In other words, the church was facing an impossible situation, a situation it was quite inadequate for, and it prayed to God for the one thing that could possibly give it the success and enable it to meet its own objectives.

And it prays quite simply for that. Oh, that thou wouldest come down. It prayed for the presence of God, it prayed for a parousia.

[37 : 21] Now, some of you may know that parousia is a technical New Testament word for the second coming. parousia is the second coming.

And yet, there is a parousia possible even here and now. In fact, a parousia which is a reality here and now.

A parousia that happened at Pentecost when the Spirit of God came upon the Church of Christ. And when we contemplate tonight the mission that we have been given by God and the mandates that God has given to us, then let's never forget that as a rebuke to all our pessimism, even I think to all our realism, we have the tremendous encouragement of the presence of God's Spirit with every living Christian congregation.

So I said God has given to us five things. He has given us Paul, Apollos, Cephas. He has given us history. He has given us the world.

He has given us the truth. He has given to us the Holy Spirit. Now these things are not to be hoarded. And you notice how the text goes on at once to say this to us.

[38 : 57] All things are yours, and you are Christ's. What will you do with those resources? And the very explicit word to us say, you have no right to hoard them.

They're all yours, but you yourselves are Christ's. and we are sinners with the truth. It's so tempting to hoard the truth.

It's so tempting to hoard our spiritual gifts. They haven't been given to us to enjoy. They haven't been given to us to admire them.

They have been given to us for the purposes of serving. God's gift. And whatever resources may be, that is always the log sheet. My gifts, your gifts, our resources together.

We can say, all things are ours, all things are mine. But I never know the right to hoard them. I am Christ's, and I must use my resources for the sake of Christ.

[40 : 12] Now I'm going to close. I've been preaching with half my mind all evening, conscious of movements around the building, and I'm very glad, of course, to welcome all the young people always to the service in the church here.

I apologize for my disconnected thinking, and I would say to the young folk that it's marvelous to have them, and to hope that God's love may speak to them, and draw them into the fullness of the gospel and its resources.

And I would hope that one day they may be their own testimony more than I can to the truth behind those great words, that one day all things may be theirs as well, and that they may notice to be heirs of God, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

It may also be, as often has been, that our poor, stammering lips may speak better than they know by the grace and by the power of Almighty God.

Let us pray. O Lord, grant us the power of thy spirit, and propel thy word into the hearts and minds of all who need thee, all who need to be liberated by the truth, who need to be sanctified by the truth, who need the resources of God and Christ in all their extent, if they are to fight their own battles, hold their own ground, and fulfill their own obligations.

[42 : 07] blessings. We thank thee, O Lord, for the fact that all things are indeed ours, and we pray thee to enable us to take courage from that, and not only take courage, but to realize that that itself constitutes obligation, that because we have so much, then so much is expected of us.

part us with thy blessing, forgiving your sin for our Savior's sake. Amen.