

CELEBRATORY SERVICE, SUNDAY 1 NOVEMBER 2009  
THEOLOGY STELLENBOSCH 150+  
DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH, STELLENBOSCH (MOEDERKERK)

*1 Corinthians 3*

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*So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (1 Cor 3:21-22).*

150 years ago, the Honourable N.J. Hofmeyr – for understandable reasons – chose 1 Cor 3:9 as text during the opening service of the Theological Seminary, in this congregation. It was understandable, because he wanted to speak about – this is how he began his sermon – the congregation, the church, and “the work in the church that they were about to begin,” their work of being God’s co-workers working together, in God’s field, on God’s building. His sermon therefore dealt with these three images for the church and the work that was awaiting them. For them it was a special moment. A small step – yet an act of faith and hope, of imagination and dreams. Co-workers in the field, co-workers on the building.

When we therefore today do not look forward, but rather backward, in deep gratitude, it may be fitting to reflect on the last words of this chapter, because we can only understand the images of verse 9 within the broader context of the whole chapter, as the intention of Paul’s argument unfolds in these final words of the chapter in verses 21 and 22. *So let no one boast about human leaders. All belong to you, yet you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*

We are immediately reminded that this is not a day to boast about human beings. It is not a day to recall names, to list success stories, to mention achievements and highlights, to honour the Pauls and the Apollosses, to document the fruit of the field and to sing about the beauty of the building. Let no one boast about people – not in Corinth, not a 150 years ago, and not today. *All belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*

In fact, we can only understand this whole chapter – with these profound concluding remarks – within the broader thrust of the whole 1 Corinthians Letter. It provides a complex argument. Paul is responding both to inquiries addressed to him by the congregation and to reports and rumours about the congregation which he received from other sources. He weaves several motifs together in one complex argument. Several themes are repeated again and again, in different ways and from diverse perspectives. Towards the end of the Letter, he then develops some of these motifs more explicitly, in a few dramatic and moving discussions. One could, however, claim that all these motifs are related to the one overall thrust of his argument, namely this theme in chapter 3 that *all belong to them, but they belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*

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Broadly speaking, there are at least *three* such motifs coming to the fore throughout the Letter and already somehow present here in chapter 3 as well.

The *first* motif is that the church in Corinth obviously lives in ways that contradict their faith and confession. Their behaviour does not reflect their convictions. They demonstrate a lack of holiness – in

church language. ‘n Lack of integrity – in our language today. They are not whole, undivided, but live with internal contradictions, with tensions within themselves between what they believe and what they do. One could perhaps even say that they are by far the most unholy and sinful congregation that we encounter in any of the New Testament documents. From their own inquiries and controversies, but especially from the rumours about them, we see dramatic abuses and evils. Perhaps the root of this lack of integrity should be traced back to their desires, to their obvious longing to have and to possess, to grab and to enjoy, to do whatever they may wish or want. Their expectation is only for this life, for the present, even their hope on Christ only serves this purpose, says Paul, of their own advantage in the present. They regard everything as lawful, for them; they think that everything belongs to them; they believe that they may do whatever they want to. They are of the flesh, he says in this chapter, of this world, living according to the passions and values and priorities that rule in society outside the church. It is about this life just for themselves and for the present only, and about the resulting lack of integrity, that he will later write in chapter 15 on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The *second* motif is their lack of unity amongst themselves, their lack of belonging and fellowship with one another. Time and again Paul returns to this theme in the Letter, almost like a refrain. One could perhaps say that they are by far the most divided congregation that we find in the New Testament documents. There is jealousy and quarrelling among them, Paul says here in verse 4. Division and conflict. They identify themselves by different names, that serve to demonstrate and strengthen their divisions. Some are from this one and others are from someone else – Paul, Apollos, Cephas. To the outside, they portray the image of a divided church, a torn church, a church in conflict. This is precisely what boasting in human leaders mean – and this is why Paul so strongly rejects this. It represents ways of claiming and boasting about their own identities that alienate and exclude others. The divisions within society clearly also run through the congregation like deep divides – a reality which shows how worldly, how much of the flesh they truly are. It is about this lack of fellowship and community that he will later write in chapters 10 and 11, on the Supper of Jesus Christ, because it is precisely at the table of the Lord where their tragic disunity is shown most visibly and painfully.

The third *motif* is their lack of love. That is in fact the deepest cause of their lack of integrity and their lack of unity. Paul addresses this repeatedly, and in many ways. Almost anything and everything divides them and demonstrates their lack of love for one another, their failure to accept and care and endure and forgive and embrace – their views on sexuality divide them; the position and status of women; their style of worship; baptism and the Lord’s Supper; spiritual gifts; the scandalous and worldly court cases they bring against one another; their diverse views on the resurrection; their conflicting passions and idolatries; their boasting in their own wisdom and their conviction that they are right; their claims concerning knowledge. Everything divides them, everything demonstrates their lack of love for one another. It is about this loveless dissension that he will later write chapters 12 and 14 about the one body and chapter 13 about love which surpasses everything.

150 years ago, Hofmeyr already spoke about these failures of the church. The church is called a building – he says at the time – but the casual onlooker may often fail to recognize the future city and the holy temple in the church. How is the congregation not misformed by friend and foe?, he asks. How mixed are the stones of the building with perishable and rejectable building material? It is called the temple of the Lord, but everywhere in this temple one finds altars dedicated to idols. It is indeed called the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, but is the Spirit of truth not often seemingly expelled by false spirits? It is called a sanctuary, but how much unholiness does not occur within it? It is called house of the children of God, but does the world not very often dictate what happens in this house? The tie that binds people together in the church is indeed called love, but is the building not rather very often the scene of conflict and strife and confusion? He raised these questions from this pulpit, in 1859.

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It is therefore in response to these shortcomings in the church – this lack of integrity, unity and love – that Paul reminds them: *All belong to you, but you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.* Time and again Paul uses these “belong” words and these “belong” arguments when he warns the Corinthians against these tendencies and these practices. Whenever they seek themselves and behave in ways unholy – you belong to Christ. Whenever they live divided and without fellowship and unity – you belong to Christ. Whenever they behave without love and compassion – you belong to Christ. Again and again, as is the case here in chapter 3. *All belong to you, yet you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*

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This is, of course, not so simple! To understand and to confess that we do not belong to ourselves is not that easy and self-evident, today. It is contradicted by the spirit of our time. For many people today this does not come easily. Even the words sound strange, almost impossible to grasp. It is as if Paul’s logic escapes us. It is in conflict with deep convictions in the air, today, in our societies and our world. After all, we are autonomous, free, we decide for ourselves. Nothing and no one prescribes to us. We choose for ourselves who we want to be and how we long to live. We belong to nothing and no one – that is often our deepest conviction.

But it is of course not only about the spirit of our time! This was precisely also the spirit in the air in Corinth. That is the reason why Paul’s argument is so remarkable. He expressly says: All things are indeed yours! You are correct! His expressions here sound exactly like the motto’s of the Stoics and the Cynics of his day – influential ways of thought at the time. It sounds almost as if he is quoting directly from Cicero and Seneca, his contemporary. As if he is quoting them with approval, agreeing with them. Elsewhere in the Letter he quotes the Corinthians themselves – on more than one occasion – when they claim that everything is allowed; that everything is for them permissible and lawful; that they may do whatever they want to; that no one can prescribe to them – and every time he agrees with them! Yes, everything is lawful. Yes, they are indeed free. Yes, everything indeed belongs to them. His list of things that are theirs sounds almost astonishing. World, life, death, present, future – everything!

Indeed, they feel the way we also feel today, the way we think and talk and often write in newspapers. We are our own. No one any longer prescribes to us. No one tells us what to think, what to do, how to live our lives. Yes, we are free from everything and all – but *as* free people, says Paul, we belong to Jesus Christ. That is precisely the reason *why* we are free! The church is free – precisely *because* the church belongs to Jesus Christ. The congregation is free and *should* be free to live freely – free from all influence and temptation and idolatry and loyalties and powers and people-with-names and spirit of the time and ideologies and worldly ideals and whatever one can name, precisely *because* the congregation belongs to Christ, and Christ to God.

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They are free and they should live like free people – free from all desires that may lead to lack of unity and love – because they belong to Christ. That is his point. This is what he wants to say. There lies his emphasis. The focus is not on the fact that we are fellow workers and that we are a field and that we are a building, no, but on the fact that we are fellow workers in the service *of God*, the field *of God*, the building *of God* (verse 9). That is Paul’s argument. People who are guided by the Spirit *of God* would

not act in the way they do (verse 1)? Who is Apollos, or Paul, or whoever, other than servants of *the Lord* (verse 5)? After all, it is not about those who plant and those who water, but *about God* who gives the growth (verses 6 and 7). It is by the *grace of God* that they may plant and build (verse 10). That is why they should take care how they build on the one foundation of *Jesus Christ* (verses 10-15). Do they not understand that they are the temple of *God* (verse 16), not their own temple? That as temple of *God* they are holy and should be holy (verse 17)? For *that* reason no one should boast about human leaders (verse 21)! The church does not belong to human leaders and human groups, but to Christ, and Christ to *God* (verse 22)! Do they really not understand all of *this*?

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*All belong to you, but you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.* Over the centuries – yes, also during the last 150 years – this assurance would comfort the church greatly. It would liberate the church – from seeking themselves and anxiety and fear. It would liberate many – for service and fellowship and love. It would liberate many – from group pressure and alien loyalties and claims. It would liberate – and comfort. Who can ever forget the first question of the *Heidelberg Catechism*? What is your sole comfort in life and in death? What carries you through? Keeps and supports you? Sustains and inspires you? And the answer: That I do not belong to myself, but to Jesus Christ, in life and death, with body and soul – so that world, life, death, present, future, whatever one may think of, will no longer intimate or enslave or frighten me. Free! – because I belong to Jesus Christ.

This comfort of the *Catechism* of course comes from Calvin himself, who was born 500 years ago, and also remembered during this year. Precisely these words were like the motto of his thought and life. Like a refrain he used to repeat these words in his work. In this knowledge we find the mystery of the Christian life, of our faith, our freedom, our service in society, according to him. We belong to Jesus Christ, and Christ belongs to God. Calvin finds this in Corinthians, which provides the key to his own views of the church. He is fascinated by 1 Cor 1:30, claiming that the congregation – precisely this unwise, unholy, divided and unloving congregation in Corinth – is already in Jesus Christ wise, holy, justified and saved! About no other congregation in the New Testament it is said as clearly and as often that they are holy! Precisely for them it is told how they are already one in Christ! Precisely to them it is proclaimed that their life does not depend on their knowledge and their love, but on God who first knew and loved them! This is what it means to belong to Jesus Christ. It is the comforting assurance that in God's perspective our lives look completely different from what we – and others who look at us – may know and see with our naked eye. It is the comfort that in God's perspective our own life-stories sound much different to what we – and others who know us – remember and tell about us.

Shortly before he is executed in prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes a deeply personal poem called "Who am I?" He reflects back on his own life, almost in the way which we are doing today and have been doing during the many conferences and lectures, publications and conversations of the past year. Many here in the worship service this morning will have their own stories to add, about their own experiences and memories – and all our stories can be told in different ways, Bonhoeffer seems to say. Seen from the outside, through the eyes of others, there may be much good to say about him, even to praise and to admire. Other people do think much of him and speak with appreciation about him. Seen from the inside, however, through his own eyes, he also knows a different story, one of vulnerability, weakness, brokenness, need. Perhaps his life is indeed both of these, he says, good moments for which to be grateful *and* tragic moments for which to lament and mourn. Then he concludes with a short prayer, of only two lines, about this comfort of 1 Corinthians 3. Whoever I am, o God, you know that I am yours, that I belong to you. With every aspect of my own story, of my own life, with both my deep gratitude *and* my deep remorse. I belong to you. This is also the comfort of the church.