

Churches on Fire: What Goes Up and What Comes Down

Jim Elliff

“I’m of John Piper!” “I’m of John MacArthur!” “I’m of R. C. Sproul!” “I’m of Allistair Begg!”

It wasn’t so bad that the Corinthian people appreciated the leaders that had come through their city (Apollos, Cephas, and even Paul himself), but that their affections moved their church to an ugly and deforming exclusiveness, or sectarianism. Ever seen that?

Needless to say, Paul disliked their attitude. He attempted to show them (1 Cor. 3) that these leaders, himself included, were completely united in their purpose and were just the various means God used to bring them salvation and grow them up in Christ. “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth,” he assured them.



Then Paul painted a picture of the church as a building, the temple of God. It’s a powerful metaphor. He had already laid the right foundation for the building, Jesus Christ. The various workers are laboring together on that foundation using those materials that were characteristic of any religious edifice of that day: gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw.

Incendiary Revelations

Then comes the disturbing part.

“Each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work.”

Paul is telling us that the quality of our labors will one day be fully known, and evaluated—with consequences!

If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (vv. 14-15)

What’s the Meaning?

Paul is saying that some leaders will be saved, but singed, escaping only with their lives. These will be true believers who otherwise have the fruits of a true Christian found in all believers. It is the *quality* of the works done for others that will be judged.

It is possible that your favorite leader could end up with nothing to show for years of labor! It is also possible that he could be rewarded beyond imagination.

A once well-known old-fashioned radio preacher, J. Harold Smith, told me that he lived with a vision in his mind related to this passage. One authority said that this man had preached more than any man who had ever lived. He had a lot to think about when he considered a passage of Scripture like the one we are looking at. He envisioned a conveyor belt upon which all his labors over all those years were carried through a huge furnace. And on the other side he saw only ashes and soot. He kept this thought before his mind as he ministered. It helped him to make sure he worked at giving his best by faith to those who received his labors.

Destroying the Temple

But there is more.

When the crusty old deacon of one southern church led his fellow deacons to oust the pastor and divide the church, God was watching. He had nothing reasonable to accuse his pastor of, who had only attempted to the best of his ability to follow God and to lead the church in a more biblical direction. But this deacon didn’t like the new way. No pastor is perfect, granted, and sometimes this young leader did not make the best of decisions, but he was not immoral, heretical, or unbiblical. He was a genuine man of God, whose ways the deacon did not like. The deacon’s foolish actions destroyed the church, splintering it into several pieces.

God sees such men and women who undermine the unity of the church for surface and ungodly reasons.

Paul addressed destructive members with these striking words as he finished up his thoughts on the church:

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you [that is, in the church]. If any man destroys the temple, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. (vv. 16-17)

The church is precious to God. He protects it. Never forget that. And what is precious to God should be precious to you, deserving the best you can give. When you leaders invest in others, do it with all the quality you can muster. If it is a true church, seek its edification. Do not promote divisions, nor seek its demise.

There is a Day coming when God will burn up the works of shoddy workmen, saving them “so as through fire,” and destroying those who destroy his church, casting them into eternal flames.