

The Church is a Farm

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[0 : 0 0] Well for a short while tonight I'd like us to turn back to 1 Corinthians chapter 3 and we're continuing a short series that we're doing in the evenings called pictures of the church. We're going to look at five images that the New Testament gives us to describe the church of Jesus Christ. Last week we looked at the image of a pillar. This week we're looking at the church as a farm and in the weeks to come we'll look at the images of a body, a mother and a bride. We're on the second one tonight as you can see on the screen and so let's turn back to 1 Corinthians 3 and I'm going to read again verses 1 right through tonight which I've put across two slides. So let's read these first verses again. Paul says, but I brothers could not oppress you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh as infants in Christ. I feed you with milk not solid food for you are not ready for it and even now you're not ready for you're still as a flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way. For when one says I follow Paul and another I follow Paulus are you not merely being human. What then is a Paulus? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. I planted a Paulus water but God gave the growth so neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one and each will receive his wages according to his labor for we are God's fellow workers you are God's field God's building. When Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth he had two great concerns unity and growth. The whole reason this letter was written was to address divisions that had a listen in this congregation and as we you can see in these verses and part of the reason why those divisions had a listen was because people were aligning themselves with particular individuals. Some would say they follow Paul I follow a Paulus and and the letter that

Paul writes is absolutely uncompromising and in its message to say that that is utterly unacceptable and and first Corinthians that great letter to go to to be reminded that that for Paul and for all the apostles the unity of the church was one of the most pressing and important issues to remember and I think it's always wise to just recognize that that for some reason that emphasis that the apostles had and has long since been forgotten in the history of the church today church unity is often a token gesture to Paul it was a burning passion today division is seen as inevitable to Paul division was unthinkable and part of the reason why they were so divisive in the church of Corinth and Corinth was because of their immaturity and then they were in great need of growth in terms of their faith you can see that in verses one to three Paul says that he can't go on to the rich food of the gospel because these Corinthians can't even get the basics of church unity right and I think that's a really interesting point that Paul makes because sometimes I think Christians have made the mistake of thinking that that that the more we grow in knowledge the more it justifies us separating from others so sometimes you know you can find people who will think you know well I've got a better grasp of theology than the people who are around me I I'm getting things in a way that other people aren't therefore I think I should move on from these people I think I should do my own thing and leave because other people aren't getting it and and throughout the history of the Christian church people have thought that the people thought well I'm kind of learning even more I'm growing more than the people around me therefore it justifies me dividing from others because they're getting so much wrong what do you think Paul would say to someone like that he would say you need to go back to milk not solid food and it's a reminder that division is really a sign of maturity it's usually a sign of childishness the Corinthian church needed unity and growth that's the big message of this letter and so we need to have that in our minds when we look at any part of it and in order to address these problems Paul uses agricultural imagery in other words he describes the church as a farm so although the word farm doesn't appear in this passage that's what he's that's the the the sector that Paul is using as his image and he's not the only one in the bible to do this in

fact many other examples of this are seen in the new testament probably the most famous of all is Jesus in the parable of the sower and in the the call for laborers to go into the harvest that we read at the start that's that's farm imagery as well Paul does it here he does it in other places as well when he writes to Timothy in 2nd Timothy 2 he uses the image image of a farmer James does it he uses the farmer as an example of patience in chapter 5

John and Peter both used the image of a seed and in Revelation 14 there's vivid imagery of a sickle and a harvest so all of that's telling us that a farm is a picture of what the church is meant to be like so here is a picture for us to look at there is a field and so we are we are thinking of the church as a field as Paul says in verse 9 he says you are God's field and within this field there are various elements and we're going to identify five in particular so within that field first of all there's planting Paul speaks about that in verse 6 he says I planted then there's labor in particular Paul talks about a polys watering again that's in verse 6 then Paul talks about growth again it's in verse 6 that he mentions in that all of this leads to a harvest which is not directly stated in this passage but it's clearly implied and it's explicitly stated in many other passages now I know I know that you didn't get combine harvesters in Corinth in the first century but it's a combine harvester it's just so cool I couldn't resist putting it up on the screen and then the last thing that Paul speaks about is wages he mentions those in verse 8 and I want us to think about all of these in a little bit more detail and we're going to do so under two headings micro and macro now you may have heard these terms before micro refers to a specific example macro means the big picture and that's what the two words mean small and big so in economics micro economics might look at a specific business or a specific period or a specific industry macro economics would look at the whole nation or the whole sector or a whole century or even more and I want us to think about a micro church fan in other words us as a congregation and I want us to think about the macro church farm in other words the story of the whole church of Jesus Christ and we're going to focus more on the first one and the last the second one macro will just really be a conclusion in a couple of minutes at the end so we're going to think in a way more detail about the micro church farm within that there's these five elements so let's go through them together first of all then there's planting the micro church farm begins with planting now what's what do you need if you're going to plant anything you need a seed and the whole emergence of the Christian church is dependent on a very specific seed what is that seed well you know the answer it's the message of the gospel and if you look back into chapter two when Paul talks about coming to the to the Corinthian church and describing the process in which that church was planted how did he do it he did it with a message you can see that in two one he says I came to you brothers not to come proclaim did not come and when I came to you brothers did not come proclaiming you to you the testimony of God with lofty spiritual wisdom for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and whom crucified it was a simple specific message it was the news that Jesus has been crucified and that through that crucifixion you and I can be saved our sins

[10:15] can be forgiven our relationship with God restored and our lives can be transformed forever and that's what the gospel is that's what lies at the heart of Christianity a message of good news so that means that the seed in God's farm is words and every Christian in here today and in this community and in this nation is a Christian because of the transforming power of that message and of course Jesus himself used exactly the same image in the parable of the sower he said that though the word is sown and planted that's where the church comes from step one is the seed message of the gospel now with that that idea of seed and planting there's two key words that I want to mention the first is investment a seed is an investment and that's such a brilliant picture of how the gospel works imagine you met a gardener and they showed you a packet of really valuable seeds and so they said to you these seeds are for the most beautiful plant in the world they are so valuable so rare and so precious in fact they are so precious I keep them in this drawer and I've kept them in this drawer for the last 30 years what would happen if you open the packet of seeds that's been in the drawer for 30 years what would you find a rotten mess they'll be ruined because a seed cannot be kept it's got to be invested and if you make that investment if you put it in the ground that's when the potential return is amazing and Jesus himself spoke in these terms he says in John 12 24 truly truly I say to you unless a bill of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone but if it dies it bears much fruit like any investment there's no guarantee that it will work but it's guaranteed that it won't work if we keep it tucked away there's a great quote from a very famous ice hockey player that I'm sure you've maybe heard of Wayne Gretzky was one of the greatest ice hockey players that there's ever been ice hockey of course a huge sport in North America I think

Wayne Gretzky is

Canadian and there's a very famous quote where he says I missed 100% of the shots that I didn't take and I think that's a great quote and and and it's a great reminder as well that there's no there's no return from 100% of the seeds that don't get planted seeds have got to be invested if Paul had kept his mouth shut in Corinth there would have been no church planted there so investments the one key word I want you to think with with planting the other keyword is throwing now if we think of planting a seed today we can tend to think of you know maybe carefully planting seeds in the greenhouse you know so maybe those of you like gardening you'll get your compost and you'll carefully plant your seeds in the in the greenhouse or maybe if you think on a farming scale you think of a big cultivator being pulled behind a track and I think nowadays the cultivators are so advanced that they they actually drill the seeds right into the ground and they've got amazing kind of implements for doing that so when we think of planting we can think of like a very delicate process in the greenhouse so we can think of a really fantastic piece of engineering getting pulled behind a massive tractor but for a farmer in the New Testament days sowing a seed meant throwing that's how it was planted Jesus describes that in the parable of the sower that's why some seed fell on rocky grounds some among thorns some of it got snatched away and some fell on good soil and took root the key thing that I want us to see there is that planting seed involves throwing and I find that a really helpful image when it comes to evangelism and sharing our faith we can sometimes think of evangelism as an art you know so you think of you hear of like a perfect conversation you people talk about having you know deep intentional analogy people who are able to get really competent defense and explanation people who got really inspiring personalities and some people are able to do that and that's good some people even boast in their ability to do that that's not so good but most people feel like they're total failures and I think that when we feel like that and when we think you know that there's some people who are really good at sharing their faith and we need to become like them if we're going to do that we need to go back to the New Testament model of evangelism which just involved throwing it out throwing the seed out there throwing out a text message to someone throwing out an invitation or a comment or an invited dinner or a demonstration that you care about them so often we're crippled by fear feeling inadequate or thinking what might happen Paul was actually exactly the same he went to Corinth in weakness and fear and in much trembling he knew that he didn't have the answer but he just went there and he threw out the seeds and so maybe when it comes to you know the people around us you know who we know and love the people we've lived beside for years or the people who've just moved into the village we're thinking to ourselves we want them to come to church maybe we just need to say to ourselves stuff it let's just throw it an invitation let's throw out the gospel but as we do that we've got to recognize that most of it probably won't take root if the parable of the sower is a paradigm for evangelism it means that three out of four times you do anything it won't work so three quarters of the soul seed soul in the parable of the sower didn't work but some of it did and that's why we've got to just throw it out even if we never see the results ourselves Paul sums it up really well or sounds like a really important point in second current themes chapter nine verse six when he says oh sorry I didn't put it on the screen sorry my fault I should have put it on the screen the verse that that says whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully and so we want to throw bountifully so just go for it just go for it second thing the church farm involves is laboring Paul gives the example of watering and that's a key aspect in growing crops but but there's many other aspects of labor required in farming it needs to be watering pruning weeding fertilizing the key point though is that that as the seed begins to grow there's still a lot of work needed watering is absolutely essential it's life-giving for a plant but watering is also hard work it's time consuming it's heavy and it's something that you have to keep on doing and all the other aspects of farming are the same Paul recognizes that in second Timothy 2 6 where he talks about the hard working farmer farming is not easy at all anyone who's watched

Clarkson's farm on the TV will see that that it's not easy work at all and that's one of the things that's definitely true of farmers is that they're grafted they've got to work really hard again the couple of things I want to highlight here that's really important for us to recognize as a church the hard work needs to come with the shoots so when the seed begins to grow when it's just poking through the ground there's a lot of work still to be done there's a lot involved in nurturing these seeds these shoots and I think that we've got to recognize that that's something that I think the church in

Scotland has forgotten or certainly gone wrong in the last 30 years because I think we've often made the mistake of thinking that the work stops once the seed germinates in other words once someone becomes a Christian or once they become a member of the church we think ah job done but the truth is the work is just beginning and we need to work just as hard to help disciple our believers as we do in terms of reaching out to the lost we need to do both and so when someone does become a Christian and we are praying that people will become

[20 : 27] Christians we want to see people come to faith in Jesus in our congregation when that happens we want to rejoice but please don't ever think ah job done we need to roll up our sleeves and water them so the hard work needs to come with the shoots but the hard work is also all about teamwork so yes we do work hard to reach out we need to work hard to nurture new believers but we don't do that on our own we do that as a team and Paul makes that beautifully clear that's the verse that I had coming up he says he who plants and he who waters are one for we are God's fellow workers as members of the church we're all members of the same team we're in it together we're supporting one another that's crucial within a congregation it's crucial between congregations we're not competing with a team and as a result we can all share in the success of each other's contribution Jesus spoke about that in John chapter 4 he says the same holds two one sows and another reaps I've sent you to reap for that which you did not labour others have laboured and you have not and you have entered into that labour and that's why we want to be as thrilled about growth in the church whether it's in carloy or cumbernaut or edinburgh or shawmust or whatever it may be it should fill us with joy because we're all in it together we need to work hard together serve together and rejoice together the church farm is full of a lot of hard labour third thing we've got in our picture is growth

Paul speaks about that in verse 6 I planted a poll swothered but God gave the growth and like any farm there's two types of growth that's needed quantity and quality so quantity the church farm is always aiming to be bigger we always want to see the church getting bigger and we must never forget that the biblical vision for the church is huge lots of numbers lots of nations lots of people and the church farm is here not to shrink but to grow to get bigger and bigger and that should be our constant prayer because we want to get bigger because that means that more people are here in the gospel more people are being saved and it should be our constant prayer for other congregations to imagine imagine that our congregations down the west side from barramas through to colonish all of them feed church and church of scottam imagine they just grew by just 10 every year imagine how amazing that would be if there was even just a tenth growth every year we want to see our numbers grow up but but that growth in quantity must never be growth at any cost in terms of numbers because there also needs to be growth in quality now by that I don't mean getting better people through the door that's complete nonsense and has nothing to do with the gospel what I mean is is growth in terms of maturity and so just like us like a tree we start off as a tiny seed we grow into a sapling but the goal is to reach full maturity as a strong broad fully grown tree and that's a really strong emphasis in scripture and it's interesting that in in 1 Timothy 3 when Paul speaks about elders in the church he says that they must not be recent converts and the word he uses for recent convert is the word neophyte which literally means newly planted and so he's reminding us that a new christian is like a new plant just sprouting up which is an amazing thing to see but it also it means that there's still a long way to go and all of us want to strive to grow more and more into maturity but what Paul reminds us in the chapter we're looking at tonight is that the key thing you need to grow is the basics that's true physically you think of a child they just need to they need balanced diet exercise sleep that's what they need to grow just they've got to get the basics right and and the Corinthian church had stumped it in their growth because they were getting the basics wrong which is why Paul says you need milk not solid food to grow as Christians we always need to come back to the basics love for God love for one another coming together in church praying reading our Bibles repenting of our sins fellowship together and rejoicing with one another these are the basics that we must keep on coming back to and these two aspects of growth quantity and quality it's just another way of describing the two great goals of the church mission and discipleship they always go hand in hand we want to reach out and bring people in and we want to nurture one another so that we will grow in order to reach maturity but in that growth there is one key mindset that we all need what do you think it is people talk about you know in terms of church they say

you know you need a lot of intentionality you need vision you courage you'd zeal these things are all good great things to have but they are not the key thing that the New Testament attaches to the idea of farming there's one key thing what is it what is the mindset that the New Testament attaches to farming patience so as Paul says in Galatians 6 9 let us not grow weary of doing good for in due season we will reap if we do not give up and that makes perfect sense because when it comes to growth in the church only God can do it our job is to keep on sowing to keep on laboring and to patiently wait for God to give the increase and we remain patient with one another as that happens and we keep on sowing the seed and praying to God that he will bring the growth fourth thing in our picture is a harvest in the church farm there is a harvest and it's a great reminder that everything that we're doing has a goal in mind and that makes working in God's church farm so exciting you think about the harvest that God has got for us in 2022 so we're into September already this year's flying by 2022 is around the corner let's think of the harvest that God has got for us we are working towards that goal it's so easy to be discouraged it's so easy to think you know that that that these days the harvest is pure that is absolutely untrue because Jesus says the harvest is plentiful it's all around us carlo a and lewis of scotland are a massive harvest field for us to work in the problem is never ever the lack of harvest it's only ever the lack of labourer the harvest is plentiful and that is our goal that's our purpose that's our mission we are working for a great harvest and then last of all in the church farm there are wages Paul says that in verse 8 let's pop it up on the screen he who fasts and he who orders are one and each will receive his wages according to his labour now this is where we think what on earth does that mean and you can kind of understand Paul's language up to this point but then you think why is he talking about wages now does it does it imply that there's kind of a salvation by works that the more you work then the better chance you've got of getting into heaven that it's kind of a reward in that regard does it imply getting a better place in heaven the more that you do know i think that what this is telling us is that serving in God's farm is worth it and that's a crucial point to remember if you think about a farm like a real farm a real life farm farms smell awful they're messy dirty and very often they are heartbreaking but working on that farm is incredibly rewarding all the sweat and muck and toil is worth it and it's reminding us that a church should be dirty

messy smelly and heartbreaking not in the sense of being all kind of casual and and flippant not at all but in the sense of being a gathering of broken people people who've mucked up in their lives people who've tried and failed people carrying bruises and scars people who are at the end of their strength people whose hearts have been broken because the church of Jesus Christ is for people like that and if you work your way at sharing the hope of the gospel with people like that if you pray for a neighbor or a friend or a colleague for a year after year after year and you eventually see them come to faith you see the lives of people around you transformed by the gospel you pour hours and hours of labor into that and you see Jesus changing someone's life then boy it is worth it it's the greatest wage you could ever see ever receive to see

Jesus at work in someone's life and it also means that the work that you do in church is worth something the image of wages tells you that God values what you do it's a great reminder that every single person here is so important in God's church farm it doesn't matter if you're doing crescent or money counting or you're on the monthly rotor for door duty or you're fixing a leaking window or cutting the grass outside having someone for lunch on Sunday whatever it is no matter what you are doing for God he values it and you know in life today it's so easy to pour so much time and energy into stuff that'll prove worthless Paul talks about that in the second half of this chapter but working in God's farm is never like that it is so rewarding and so valuable and that should be such a motivation for us to serve him in the week ahead so the the church of Jesus Christ is a farm we bring our picture back up again it has a message that we plant we throw it there it has members who labour you and me and all our brothers and sisters in Christ we do that with a mindset of patience as we look for God to bring growth we have a mission to bring a harvest and we are motivated because serving here is rewarding and all of it is for the one master as Paul says you are God's field but as we conclude I want us to just recognize that it's not just about us here as a micro church farm because we are here serving as part of something way bigger and that's where we reminded that unity and growth that lies at the heart of this letter is not just about us being united and growing as a congregation even though that's really important it's about being part of God's big farm the whole church of Jesus Christ that stretches across every nation of the world and the pattern that we have here before us doesn't just set out practical lessons for us to think about in the weeks and months ahead it's also describing the great theological truths around

[34 : 16] God's great plan for his church because what you have in front of you there is a summary of redemptive history in the post-apostolic era what I mean by that is a summary of God's plan in the days since Jesus was walking on this earth because we're planting for 2000 years a message is sown among the nations of the world there's labor as God has raised people up to serve across history across nations there's growth the church of Jesus Christ is growing and it's still growing the growth in terms of quantity is incredible 120 people in Acts chapter one billions of people today and the growth in quality is amazing as well because you've seen people come to faith with such a childlike faith I became a Christian knowing virtually nothing and yet we grow and some people have grown to become giants of faith and I sure you have known many in your lives yourselves the harvest is still there so much has been taken in but the fields are still ready for harvest for more and ultimately there's an amazing reward when Jesus returns and when we join him in the new creation then the farm will no longer be battling in a wilderness it'll be flourishing in a paradise but the key point is that every step is not about us every step is about Jesus and I think that that's an amazing thing to be reminded of when we think of that farm in him image the seed is the message about Jesus the labor is done by a team assembled by Jesus and empowered by him the growth is growth into Jesus as more converts are united to him and as we grow to become more like him the harvest is a gift to Jesus and the reward is an eternity with Jesus it's all centered on Jesus it is all so exciting God's farm is an amazing place to work and you know you must maybe think to yourself well do you know what

I'd love to have a job there you've already got one you're already on staff we're all in it together and by God's grace we just need to go for it with him ahead of us amen let's pray Father we thank you that we can serve in your church farm we pray that we would be planting your seed in every way that we can we pray that we would be ready to labor and work in any way that that's needed we pray that you will bring growth we pray that there will be a great harvest brought in and we we are so motivated by all the amazing promises that you give us and so we pray that you take us all and use us and we pray that that this farm would grow to your glory amen