

Holy by Grace. Bound for Glory. Now What?

Building Faithfully

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

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⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

- 1 Corinthians 3:5-15, ESV

The Washington Monument & the Nashville Parthenon

The Washington Monument is the beautiful centerpiece of downtown Washington, DC. Today, it's one of the most recognizable buildings in the world, but it took a very long time to build and had to overcome a whole host of problems. Construction began in 1848 and was not completed until 1888. For 23 years, from 1854 to 1877, construction was halted by political squabbling, a lack of funding, and then the Civil War. The decision to continue construction was made in 1876, on the 100th anniversary of the country, but an investigation soon found that the foundation was weak and that the monument had sunk by 1.3 meters, or about 4 feet, and that serious underpinning was necessary for the monument to be completed. The underpinning was completed and the monument finished, capped by an aluminum pyramid.

An interesting fact to note in the delay of the Washington Monument: Not only can you see the stop and re-start of the construction today in the use of two different colors of granite in the monument itself, but the whole design was changed radically, too. Robert Mills' original design was essentially a giant temple to George Washington, with the tall obelisk surrounded at the base by a pantheon (a Greek-style Temple) of 30 columns, honoring the Father of our Country. Funding was dependent on donations and enough money never came in. By the time the monument was finished, the pantheon temple was scrapped, and an aluminum cap was installed. The East side of the cap, facing the sunrise, has the words "Laus Deo," Praise be to God.

Shortly after the Washington Monument was completed, the City of Nashville held a festival to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the State of Tennessee in 1897. Nashville had developed a reputation as "The Athens of the South" because of its excellent universities, including Vanderbilt University, founded in 1873. To celebrate their identity, Nashville built a full-scale replica of the Parthenon from ancient Athens – the only full-scale reproduction of the Parthenon in the world. It was only intended to be temporary, but it was so popular, they

decided not to tear it down. However, the Parthenon was built of brick, wood, and plaster, so it started deteriorating and needed to be completely rebuilt out of concrete in the early 1920s.

For a building to be stable and stand the test of time, it needs a solid, strong foundation and it needs to be built out of durable materials. Paul makes reference to both of these truths in 1 Corinthians 3 as he describes the faithful building of the church. Paul had been speaking of himself and Apollos as those who planted and watered the seed of the Word in the church at Corinth, while God was the One who gave the growth.

Then, in verse 9, he switches suddenly from the image of a farmer's field to the image of a building: "*For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.*"

A. Christ, our Life & the Only Foundation, vv.10-11

Within the field metaphor, Paul was the one who planted the seed, but in the building metaphor, Paul is the "skilled master builder":

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Perhaps a better translation for the term Paul uses to describe himself is "a wise architect-builder." The Greek phrase is "*sophos architecton*," which sounds like sophisticated architect. Sophos is the Greek word for wisdom, that quality the Corinthians admired so much; but here, wisdom is not seen in speaking but in building. And while we do get our English word architect from the word *architecton*, the term in Greek actually describes someone who functions more like the general contractor or project manager on the building project. He doesn't come up with the plan, but he ensures that the plan is followed, especially in the vital early stages of the building.

How did Paul lay the foundation for the church at Corinth? He told us back at the beginning of chapter 2:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. – 1 Cor. 2:1-5, ESV

The church has only one true foundation, Jesus Christ Himself. And we know Jesus Christ only through the Word of God, and so the way to lay the foundation of the church is to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified from the Word of God.

The idea that the church has only one foundation, Jesus Christ, and that no one can lay any other foundation for the church but Jesus Christ tells us much about the nature of the church:

- The church is to be the visible manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth, and Jesus Christ is the King over God's kingdom.
- The church is a living Temple, being built for the glory of God, and Jesus Christ is the foundation, the Chief Cornerstone, and the capstone of this Temple. He is the first and last, the Alpha and Omega, the author and finisher of our faith.
- The church is the flock of God, and Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life to purchase the flock, to redeem us out of bondage, and whose voice calls us to follow Him as our Good Shepherd.

This is what the church is, and each local congregation or group of churches in a Presbytery or a national or international collection of churches in a denomination, is to be a manifestation of this eternal and unalterable plan and blueprint for the church. You can't build local church or a Presbytery or denomination on any other foundation but Jesus Christ, or else it's not a church.

Some Old Testament background would help us see God's plan here more clearly: Paul is using language of building and, specifically, the language of Temple building, as we'll see in our next sermon in two weeks. The plans for what would be the Temple in Jerusalem were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai as the plans for the Tabernacle. God told Moses in Exodus 26:30: "*Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to the plan for it that you were shown on the mountain.*"

This Tabernacle, constructed under Moses' supervision, stood for almost 500 years, until Solomon built a permanent building version of it in Jerusalem, called the Temple. The Tabernacle was a tent, while the Temple was a building, made of wood and stone and covered in gold inside. That Temple stood, in two different versions, for over 1,000 years and was still standing in Jerusalem when Paul was writing I Corinthians.

But even as that Temple still stood, God promised another, more glorious Temple to come. Isaiah 28:16 says, "*therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste [or, will not be shaken].'*" This verse from Isaiah is quoted by both Peter and Paul, by Peter in I Peter 2:6 and by Paul in Romans 9:33 & 10:11. Another Old Testament verse quoted repeatedly in the New Testament is Psalm 118:22-23 –

*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.*

*This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

This verse is referenced in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts and I Peter. It's clear from how the NT authors quote these verses that the cornerstone in view in Psalm 118 and Isaiah 28 is Jesus Himself.

So, God is building a new a living, eternal Temple, one which has been under construction for 2,000 years and which will stand for eternity as The New Jerusalem, the Temple-City revealed in Revelation 21, the glorious bride of Christ, the church of Jesus Christ. God is only building ONE Temple, which has ONE foundation, ONE chief cornerstone, and will, in the end, be crowned by ONE capstone at its completion.

This is why “no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” People have tried that thousands of times, but they weren’t building the Church of Jesus Christ, because they weren’t building on the foundation of Jesus Christ, as He is revealed to us in the Gospel in the Holy Scriptures.

What holds the one church together is not organizational unity but a vital spiritual unity to the foundation, the Lord Jesus. If we are joined to and building on the same foundation, then we are part of the same church – one universal church, which will be fully and gloriously revealed at the Last Day, as we’ll see.

B. Building on the Foundation, vv. 12-13

So, if we belong to Jesus Christ, and we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are building on the same foundation, building up the same church. But does that mean that everyone is building in the same way and that everyone’s work of building is to be commended and will endure? No.

12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. – vv. 12-13

Paul says clearly that we can be building on the same foundation, the one foundation of Jesus, and be building with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw. Now, while Paul lists six building materials, they fall into two clear categories – gold, silver, and precious stones are highly valuable materials, but they are also fireproof; they don’t burn up. Wood, hay and straw are far less precious and they burn up.

Charles Hodge, in his commentary, points out another difference: Gold, silver, and precious stones are the kinds of building materials used in constructing Temples – especially if we understand “precious stones” to refer to marble and granite – which is probably what Paul has in mind, as highly valued building stone, as opposed to common field stone, that might be used for building up pasture walls or private homes. On the other hand, wood, hay, and straw are used to build cottages, private homes – wood to frame it, straw to stuff the walls, and hay for the roof. It does seem right that Paul is distinguishing between the kinds of precious, valuable, enduring things used to make important buildings meant to last, like temples, against common, combustible materials used to make private homes.

So, what does this have to do with church work, or with building up the church? Well, once we have been secured in our salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, once the church has been established on the solid rock of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the Gospel, then what? What do we trust in and look to in order to build us up and to build up the church?

The gold, silver, and precious stone must refer to the Christ-centered, Gospel-grounded truths of God’s word. As we read the Bible, teach the Bible, and so build one another up in Christ, we are building in a lasting way, in a way in keeping with the foundation. Also, Paul had said earlier, in verse 12, “Let each one take care *how* he builds on it.” So, the material we use matters, but the method or approach or intent matters, too.

In the context of I Corinthians 3, you might think these instructions are only relevant for pastors or elders or itinerant preachers like Apollos, and it does have primary application to those who lead and preach or teach within the church, but it has implications and application for all Christians, because we’re all called to service within the church, and we each have a responsibility for building up the body of Christ:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

– Ephesians 4:11-16, ESV

So, Christ does give His church apostles and prophets, first. They were those, like Paul and Peter, who laid the foundation for the church in the Word of God. Jesus also gave evangelists like Apollos, who travelled to preach and strengthen the church and reach out with the Gospel. He also gives the church shepherds and teachers, which refers to the elders and pastors of His church.

All of these are given to the church by Christ “*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*” But the work of ministry and the building up of the body is the work of every member of the church, as verses 15-16 make clear: “*speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*”

We are all called to speak the truth in love, and we are all called to grow up in every way into Christ. The body only grows properly when each part is working properly, making the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. That means each one of us has a role to play in the building of the church. We’re each gifted and called to service in the Body of Christ.

Now, not every member of the body of Christ is held to the same standard. James 3:1 says, “*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*” But still, we’re all gifted, called, and accountable.

The words we use and the way we use them matters tremendously – gossip, slander, legalism, guilt-manipulation, false teachings, etc. all have a poisonous effect in the life of the church and not just when preached from the pulpit. Also, words of Christ-centered, Gospel-rich encouragement build up the body of Christ powerfully, and not just when spoken from the pulpit.

C. The Coming Day of Revelation by Fire, vv. 14-15

Think about how profoundly powerful this truth is: Christ is building up His church as an eternally glorious Temple where He will dwell with His people and which will shine with the radiance of His glory. Revelation 21 is full of such glorious language describing the New Jerusalem, the glorious Temple-City – streets of transparent gold, 12 gates each made of a single pearl, foundations laid on massive precious stones. This is the glorious Temple-City Jesus is building right now as He builds His church, and He is building His church through us – through you and me.

As if it were not enough for Him to have mercy on us and forgive us. As if it were not enough for Him to adopt us into His family as the younger brothers and sisters of Christ. As if it were not enough for Him to make us, by

grace alone, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. As if it were not enough for Him to continually intercede for us and to prepare a place for us, to keep for us in heaven an inheritance imperishable. On top of all of this, He calls us to service in His kingdom and through our words and our works, He is building up His church, He is constructing the glorious Temple-City through our mouths and hands!

And gloriously wonderful and stunning as that thought is, it is also humbling and sobering to know that we will give an account to God as the works we do in the church will be judged:

13 each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Paul says a day of fiery revelation is coming, a day of testing and trial by fire. This is NOT talking about purgatory, which is the Roman Catholic doctrine that believers are made to suffer after this life is over, to pay for the remaining sin that we've not overcome in this life. This is not a fiery judgment of individual Christians, but it is a trial of the works we do in building up the church.

What work have you built on the foundation of Christ? Is it eternal and God-glorifying, Christ-centered Gospel truth? Or is it self-centered, self-promoting, secular, worldly wisdom appealing to the flesh and not coming from God? The day that is coming will reveal it. The works we do will pass through the fire of Christ's appearing.

D. The Reward for the Worker & Builder, vv. 8 & 14

I don't know about you, but I don't want to waste my time building with wood and hay and stubble, just to see it all burned up. I don't want to be ashamed of the work I've done in building up the church when Jesus appears. I want to hear "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*"

Jesus calls us to be looking to the reward He promises us here: "*If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.*" This reward was already mentioned in verse 8: "*He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.*"

Hebrews 11:24-26 says of Moses: "*By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.*"

As Paul says of himself in Philippians 3:12-16: "*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.*"

Yes, God has offered us a reward for faithful service in His kingdom, building His church. He gives us the work to do, He prepares us to do the work, and then He offers us a reward for doing what he has prepared for us and prepared us for. It's a very gracious arrangement and not a "salvation by works" at all. He saves us by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, not as a result of works. But then, having saved us, He gives us work to do and rewards us.

What is the reward? I don't think it's helpful to think in terms of a nicer, bigger mansion or a shinier crown. Isn't the best reward imaginable having the Lord Jesus look at you and say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master."? That's the great reward – the joy of the Lord and the satisfaction of His smile!

Conclusion: How's Your Building?

This passage is challenging to us as Americans because we're conditioned to be so individualistic. We think of our personal relationship with God, our walk with Jesus, our spiritual growth. And so we look at a passage like this, and we might think the trial by fire is of our lives and our obedience personally. But the picture is focused on the church that Christ is building, and the part we play in His church.

So, how are you building? How's your building project within the kingdom of God going? Are you building up the church? Are you answering His call to His kingdom priorities? What Christ is doing in this world through His church is what will last forever. To be a part of that work and to contribute even one stone is to glorify God in a way that will resound in glory forever!