

Building Inspections

A few weeks ago we received a phone call in the church office from the Dixon Fire Department. They asked if there was a convenient time when they could come in and take a walk around the building. We set up a time and a few days later a couple of men from the Fire Department, accompanied by Tom Cartwright, spent a morning taking that walk. It turned out to be more like a full scale fire inspection, and before it was over they had peeked into just about every nook and cranny of the church. They followed up with a written report recommending several small things we need to do to bring our building up to code. As much as we might dislike the idea of a building inspections, it will help ensure that we are best stewards we can be of this wonderful place God has blessed us with as our home base for worshipping and serving Christ.

In this morning's reading, Paul is interested in his own way in building inspections—although maybe not in quite the way the Dixon Fire Department is. Since the beginning of the letter Paul has been focusing on a problem in the church in Corinth. On the surface at least, the problem is about leadership—their admiration for certain leaders in the church has divided the congregation, and it has gotten in the way of fulfilling their potential as followers of Jesus.

Here in chapter three Paul has been trying to give them a different perspective on the role of leaders in the church. He's been trying to clear up their muddled thinking by means of two metaphors, two pictures of the church

and its leaders. In last week's reading he described the church as a field, and said that leaders in the church are nothing more than farmhands. Pastors, and teachers, and elders, and other leaders may have a part to play in the process, but only God can grow a church.

And now Paul shifts to a second picture. He says that the church is also like a building—and we should think of those who lead the church as skilled craftspeople—as the carpenters and masons and plumbers and electricians who build it.

Before we unpack this picture a bit, it might be wise to make a couple of observations about what this passage is not about, since Christians have a tendency to read a lot of things into it that aren't really there. This is especially the case with verses 12-15, all that stuff about our work being tested by fire. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have found in these verses the only possible biblical basis for their doctrine of purgatory. Meanwhile, some Protestants have used this passage to argue about what some call the doctrine of “eternal security” or “the perseverance of the saints”—in other words whether it's possible for Christians to lose their salvation once they have believed. But Paul isn't really talking about any of that here. He isn't even talking about individual Christians at all. He's talking about how we build the church and our accountability to God for doing our part.

This week's message then is really the flip side of last week's. Only God can grow a church, but we're also responsible for doing our part. So our

question for today is: How do we build God's church? What is our part in the process?

I need to begin with a disclaimer—my construction experience and skills are extremely limited. On a good day I can hammer a nail in straight, or almost cut a board straight with a handsaw, or paint a wall without making too much of a mess—but that's just about it. And most of what I know about building actual houses comes by observing other people build houses for Habitat for Humanity.

Having said that, Paul says that the church is God's building, and we will be accountable for how we do our part in building it. And he assures us that in the end we all will have to face a great building inspection--a "trial by fire" in which we will see how well we've built.

The last couple of verses in the reading actually make a good starting point—because if we are to build faithfully it's important to know what we're trying to build. Paul says, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" The word translated as "temple" actually means something closer to a "sanctuary." So Paul is saying in verse 16, you—the church--are God's sanctuary. And as God's sanctuary the church is the place where the Holy Spirit dwells. In other words, God has created the church to be a community in which the Spirit is alive and present, and that means that if someone is with a community of Christians, he or she should sense that they are in the presence of the love and holiness and life-changing power of God.

The New Testament scholar Gordon Fee makes this striking statement:

One of the desperate needs of the church [today] is to recapture this vision of what it is by grace, and therefore also what God intends it to be ... Seldom does one sense that it is, or can be, experienced as a community that is so powerfully indwelt by the Spirit that it functions as a genuine alternative to the pagan world in which it is found ... It is perhaps not too strong to suggest that the recapturing of this vision ... is [the church's] single greatest need. (Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 149-50).

If that's what God is building—his holy sanctuary where his Spirit dwells on earth—what is our part in building it? Logically enough, Paul starts with the foundation. He says, "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation"—the only foundation that can be laid—and "that foundation is Jesus Christ." Even with my limited experience with building houses, I can appreciate how important it is to get the foundation right. In fact, in seeing several Habitat for Humanity homes built in two different communities, the part I've never seen it left for volunteers to do, is laying the foundation. In every case that work has been contracted out to a "skilled master builder." It's not a place to try to cut corners, or save a few dollars in the construction budget.

So how well do we do at laying the foundation? As we read in chapter 3 it's important not to forget everything Paul has already said in chapters 1 and 2. So when he says here that he laid the foundation of Jesus Christ, we should remember what he said earlier: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). The foundation he laid was the message of the cross and the resurrection. Paul didn't lay a foundation of

what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace”—he laid a foundation of costly grace, a foundation that includes the teaching of Jesus’ parables and Sermon on the Mount, that calls men and women to service and discipleship, even to the point of laying down our own lives.

How well do we lay that foundation? I think that by custom and habit we face two potential pitfalls. First, it’s tempting think of laying the foundation as being mostly about children and Sunday School, and secondly, we may also think of it as something that can be done in a classroom or a worship service. But laying a firm foundation of Christ involves things that go beyond what can be taught in a classroom. Knowing and believing are essential, but laying the foundation also has to do with behaving and belonging, things that can only be taught through the love, acceptance, and discipline of God’s people.

We’ve just begun a confirmation process for our two eighth graders, Alan and Christian. We’re using a mentoring-based program this year. To be honest, one reason for doing it this way is because it’s a practical way to teach a small number of confirmands. But the mentoring approach is good one in other ways. Confirmation classes can turn into just that—classes where a lot of information is shared. But a mentoring program provides an opportunity to build relationships, to emphasize the behaving and belonging part of discipleship, too. To paraphrase an old proverb, “It takes a community to make a disciple,” and mentoring is one way to do that in a way that’s consistent with the teaching of Jesus.

That actually brings us to the next part. Once we've laid the foundation, how will we build on it? Will we suddenly forget everything we've learned about Jesus and turn to the latest trends and fads from the secular world? Will we talk about marketing strategies and branding instead of evangelism? Will we rely on the latest fads in psychology and education instead of following Jesus' model of forming disciples? Will we adopt the newest managerial techniques instead of training servant leaders? Or will we build in a way that fits the foundation? Will we model our lives, and our life together, after Jesus? Will we strive to become that holy sanctuary, with the Spirit dwelling powerfully among us? Will we enter the world to serve, even to lay down our lives for others? Are those the things we teach and live?

When I was in eighth grade, one day my math teacher, Mr. Kenyon, showed our class a crack in the wall of our classroom. Some engineer had placed a ruler across the crack, and Mr. Kenyon explained that they checked that crack every morning. If it suddenly grew wider by more than certain amount, we were to immediately evacuate the building before it fell down on us. It turns out that our old school building had been built on an inadequate foundation, and then years later it was decided to add another story on top of the original structure. All seemed well for years—but eventually that combination of a poorly laid foundation and unwise building brought us to the brink of calamity.

Paul encourages us to lay the foundation of Jesus Christ, and then encourages us to build on it with the best materials we can. And the important characteristic of the things Paul mentions here—gold, silver, and precious stones—is that they're durable and can withstand the test of fire. It's no small coincidence that their costly, too. Will we build Christ's church in way endures? Are we willing to pay the cost—not in dollars and cents, but in time and talent and love and devotion and prayer?

More often than not the written histories of congregations have a lot to say about buildings and pastors, sometimes about programs. But the real story of a church is always about people. It's the story of lives formed and transformed by the message of the cross, of acts of love and service, of the Lord's people seeking justice and loving mercy and walking humbly with their God. A church's legacy isn't in buildings and endowment funds but in the presence of Jesus Christ in human lives.

If the building inspector were to come tomorrow, what would he find? What foundation have we laid? How are we building on it?

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