

SR02414 First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

The Rev. Dr. John Judson

“Foundations: Build”

Exodus 13:17-22;

I Corinthians 3:10-17

February 23, 2014

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It was a decision that had to be made. What kind of a foundation were we going to use. At my previous church we were building a new sanctuary and we needed to decide what kind of a foundation would be best. Part of our facility, a gym that had been built just as I arrived was built on compacted, neutralized soil. It appeared to be quite stable and had been so for about ten years. On the other hand much of the rest of the building was built on piers. It was on piers because the soil on which the church sat was a soft loamy soil which would either grow or shrink depending on the soil's moisture content. The safe choice would seem obvious, build it on piers. Unfortunately the safe choice was also the most expensive adding more than one hundred thousand dollars to the cost of the sanctuary. So which kind of foundation would be choose?

In some ways this was the metaphorical dilemma of the church at Corinth. They had to decide what kind of a religious or spiritual foundation would underlie their church. While we may wonder why there was a problem with this choice, surely they would choose Jesus Christ, the issue was that in the Roman world, religion, society, culture and philosophy were all melded together into a complete way of life. If one strayed too far outside the bounds of acceptable religious life, one was seen as rebelling against the empire and everything for which it stood. This is what happened to Mark Antony when he tried to introduce Egyptian gods into the pantheon of worship. So when the Corinthians had to choose a foundation for their life together, it was far easier and safer to choose the already existing tradition and place Jesus upon it. Paul however would have none of that. The only foundation, even in the face of Roman resistance had to be Jesus Christ.

Paul, I believe, understood the dilemma of the church. He had been raised as a Roman citizen in Tarsus which was a Romanized city. What Paul does next is brilliant, and I believe often missed by those of us in this day and age. He uses images from the culture with which the Corinthians were familiar. The most important parts of his case are contained in verses 16 and 17. “Don't you know that you are God's Temple...for God's temple is holy and you are God's temple.” Many of us who are familiar with these verses have seen them used to describe why we are to keep our physical bodies holy. What we need to realize is that the “you” here is plural, and plural in a way that refers to the entire body of ~~believers as believers as~~ the church. In other words Paul was telling them that they, the church, were a new temple being built for the one, true living God. This, the Corinthians would have understood. They knew that a temple was the place God dwelled and where God was worshipped. Since the church had no building, Paul was telling them that they were a living temple where the living God, through the Spirit, was present and was to be worshipped...and here is the connection with Jesus...a temple to the living God could only be founded upon Jesus Christ who was the Son of God whom this God raised from the dead. No other foundation would do. No other temple would suffice.

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This imagery of the temple is what also explains Paul's earlier references to the type of gifts that were being brought. In the Roman Empire, temples were everywhere. Virtually every city had temples to one god or another. It was in fact a great honor for a city to build a temple and because of that people were willing to give a great deal to their construction. Needless to say temples in the less-wealthy areas often suffered greatly from fire and earthquake because they were not constructed with better materials. In the same way Paul makes it clear that the quality of the Corinthian church/temple was going to be the quality of the gifts that people were willing to bring. Gifts here referred not simply to monetary gifts, but

to the quality of the communal life. They were to bring the gifts of cooperation, of growth, of service and as we shall see a bit later in Corinthians, love. Only by adding these gifts, their best gifts to the foundation of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, would the Corinthian temple/church become one that would stand the test of time.

In many ways the world has changed little since the time of Paul's relationship with the Corinthians...especially for the church. For you see, the church still has multiple options for its foundation from which to choose. This is so because just as the Corinthians were immersed in a particular culture, each church is immersed in a particular church culture as well. I offer you three examples. The first is worship. Worship is central to the life and work of any church. Without it the church would cease to exist. It is tempting for churches then to believe that the act of worship is the one and only thing that matters...thus making it the foundation. Secondly there is mission. Mission is central to the life of the church. It allows those of us who are part of the believing community to allow God's love and grace to become real in the world. The temptation though is to act as if the only thing that matters is mission...thus making it the foundation. My final example is that of education. This is in some ways more prevalent in the south, where the success of a church is not measure by worship or mission, but by how many people there are involved in Christian education...thus making it the foundation. What Paul can remind us of, is that while all of these things matter...they are bricks. They are the bricks that have little meaning or purpose if they are not built upon Jesus Christ. Worship is to praise and honor God through Christ. Mission is to show the love of God in Jesus Christ. Education is to teach ourselves the great story of God's love culminating in Jesus Christ.

For the last one hundred and eighty years the people of this church community have been building a temple; a place where God is present and God is worshiped. But in this moment what matters is not what has been, but what we are doing today. What kind of gifts are we bringing to the building of this temple? Are we offering our best? Are we giving to the church that which will insure that it is still worshipping, serving and teach for another one hundred and eighty years? I realize that many of us don't believe that we have best gifts to give. We don't see ourselves as deep spiritual people. Yet I believe that each of us has best gifts to give...even when we do not realize it. This morning I will offer a story from Africa...Amy got to tell a Greek story...so here is my African one.

Over dinner one night one of the pastors told me of a Maasai girl that he knew who had been a member of the Presbyterian Church where he served. As is often the case she was married off at the age of about 13. She left her family and her village in order to go and live with her husband and his family. When she arrived she discovered that there was no church; not simply no Presbyterian Church, but no church at all. This was a bit distressing. Yet at thirteen what could she do. After she had been in the village a while she decided to tell the children about Jesus. She got her Bible and began to read stories and talk about them. Soon some of the mothers began to come with their children and they too enjoyed the stories. After some more time the men even began to attend. After about a year of meeting under a tree and telling the people about Jesus, she sent word to her former pastor that there was another Presbyterian church that need a pastor. Realize, this girl had no formal training, no theological education and little life experience. All she had was faith in Jesus Christ and a willingness to tell the Jesus' stories. She understood what mattered...to quote Paul, "Jesus Christ and him crucified." This young woman reminds us that God desires not spectacular gifts...but our best ones.

My former church decided that they would go with the more secure foundation and that they would find a way to pay for it. They did so because they wanted to build something that would last. My hope is that this is what we are about as well, building something that lasts. But this can only be done when we bring our best gifts to the work and witness of the church. My challenge for you this week then is to ask this question, "Am I bringing my best gifts to the life of Everybody's Church such that, building on the foundation of Jesus Christ, we might create a temple that lasts?"