

Firm in our Foundation

1 Corinthians 3:10-17

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

16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

My first mission trip took place during Spring Break of my senior year in high school. In the months leading up to the trip, we began preparing for a rather interesting project in the Rio Grande Valley. Our task was to put a new floor in a house situated in a *colonia* - an unincorporated neighborhood without sewer, street lights and other city services. The problem was, there wasn't a floor to begin with. There were four walls and a roof, but just a dirt floor underfoot. Somehow, with walls already in place, we – a bunch of kids and novice adults - were supposed to add a concrete floor inside this house.

Needless to say, we were a little fuzzy on how we would make this happen with any lasting quality. But as the trip leaders wrestled with this issue, suddenly the project changed. About a month before our trip, the house we were to work within caught fire and burned to the ground.

At first, the question was whether the trip would still happen. But then, our team leaders realized the opportunity. We could build a new house and build it right...in the right order, rightly held together with the proper foundation.

I've often thought there are a lot of churches like that house. They look like every other house from the outside. Perhaps they are even attractive enough to entice people to go inside. But what's holding them together?

Earlier this week, *The New York Times* published an article about a 220-year-old Presbyterian Church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It was the headline that first caught my attention: *The Church Where Believing in God Isn't Strictly Necessary*. This church has been going through a reinvention, seeking to reverse attendance declines and adjust to a changing neighborhood. This reinvented church still has some traditional aspects. They still worship on Sunday mornings. They still pray for one another. They still hold some tenets of the faith, and attempt to be a safe space for conversations about God. But, as a congregation, instead of sharing a belief in God, the article states, what holds this church together is “a different code of convictions – social justice efforts, activism against climate change, meal programs for the homeless, and a task force to help refugee families.”

On the Sunday in which the reporter attended, the sermon centered on the perils of genetically modified vegetables. And after the service was over, he caught up to a regular attendee to ask why she attends this church. This woman told him she began coming to the church several years ago because it was close to her apartment. However, she does not consider herself an observant Christian. “I believe he was a good guy,” she said of Jesus. But, “I'm more into the social aspect.”ⁱ

As I read this article, I tried to find some redeeming value in this church's reinvention project. I agree that the church isn't for people who have it all figured out. The church should be a safe space for people to explore their faith – to ask questions about who God is and why belief in that God matters. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with reasonable earth stewardship or social justice. I think Jesus was pro-justice. But there it is...I've exposed my own bias. I believe any sort of church program for the homeless or project for refugees – any sort of justice effort or life transformation endeavor - has to be tethered to something. The starting point must be Jesus Christ. Otherwise, the church is just four walls and a roof that aren't anchored to anything. The church is nothing more than a movie set façade. It looks real...but it's not.

That's the concern Paul emphasized in the heart of our scripture lesson this morning. Paul challenged the church in Corinth to remember that their foundation was Jesus Christ. Anything else they were trying to be, anything else they were trying to do, would be problematic if Jesus wasn't at the center of it.

For the last nine months, a team here at First Christian Church has been meeting monthly to help us carefully and prayerfully consider where God is calling us to go as a congregation and how we can best serve in Christ's name. For the better part of our time together, this Vision Team has been focused on uncovering our unique calling and our unique identity as a 129-year-old Disciples of Christ congregation planted at 3701 Taft Blvd. in Wichita Falls, Texas, in a neighborhood across the street from Midwestern State University.

While the work of our Vision Team continues, for the next six weeks in worship, we are going to be thinking and talking about a portion of our identity as a congregation that this team has uncovered. We are going to seek to describe *why we do what we do*. What's in our DNA – what values cause this congregation – cause us - to act in a particular way? These values aren't what we do, but they characterize what we do.

Here's how to think about the difference. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy articulated his vision for space exploration on behalf of freedom, peace, and democracy – and he challenged the nation to land a person on the moon within the decade. This was the clear and compelling picture of what we were going to work for as a nation. We were going to get a human from point A (the earth) to point B (the moon).

However, it was the Apollo 13 lunar mission that revealed one of our values as a nation. When an oxygen tank exploded on the second day of that mission, the planned lunar landing was aborted and all of NASA's energy was focused on the preservation of human life. Because of the incredible ingenuity of those engineers working under fierce time constraints, six days after launch, the crew was brought back to earth alive.

The mission was all about landing on the moon. But when push-came-to-shove, the value of human life was far greater for us as a nation than a third lunar landing. That's what values do for us. They tell us what the non-negotiables are. They represent what we are not willing to sacrifice in the accomplishment of the mission – why we do or will not do something.

Our vision team has been working on the “what” of our mission and the specifics of how we will accomplish that mission will come soon enough. But, it is critical to begin with identifying the guardrails along the road we will be taking going forward. These guardrails – our values - serve as the conscience of our church. They are to prevent us from veering off the roadway or careening off a proverbial cliff. They serve as the core motives and convictions of our identity that do not change. And, one of those values here at First Christian Church is being firm in our foundation – a value I noted a moment ago we find clearly articulated in our scripture lesson this morning.

The Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is a letter written to a church best described as a “mess.” Various issues had arisen in the church. There were differences of doctrine, questions about church discipline, personal disputes, and numerous divisions within the church that needed Paul’s counsel and corrective. In the opening paragraphs of his response to the Corinthians, Paul reminds them that he was laser focused on one thing when he formed the church and taught the church’s early believers: “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified,” he declared. (2:2) However, since that time, the Corinthian church had lost that focus.

The third chapter of 1 Corinthians finds Paul naming some of the ways the church had lost focus on Jesus Christ. The first way they had been knocked off course was by glorifying human leaders. Some in the church were lining up behind Paul, claiming him to be the luminary figure behind the church, while others were saying it was Apollos who caused the Corinthian church to grow. To this, Paul provides an image of the church as God’s field. In the verses just before our scripture lesson this morning, Paul claimed that he planted the field and Apollos watered it, but God caused it to grow. (3:6) The point of this image was to clearly establish that God uses humans as workers in God’s grand plan, but it’s only the God we know in Jesus Christ who can bring about new life.

The second way the Corinthians had lost focus was by unwisely building the church on a shaky foundation. Here, the image Paul paints is the people of the church as builders. He states that he had laid the right foundation – Jesus Christ – and it was the responsibility of the church – the builders – to properly build upon it. And the work of these builders will be tested. They

will pass the test if the original preaching of the crucified and risen Christ, and not human wisdom or human leaders, is the one foundation of the church.ⁱⁱ

But Paul wasn't done just yet. The third way he noted that the Corinthian church had lost focus on Jesus Christ was in the way they were ruining, corrupting, defiling, and destroying the temple of God. Although the temple in Jerusalem was still standing as Paul wrote those words, Paul wasn't talking about a physical location. He was talking about the consecrated community – the church.

Sometimes when we read this passage, the pronouns throw us off, and we think that the reference to “the body as God's temple” is about us as individuals. It's about properly caring for our own physical bodies. But in the Greek, the question, “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple?” is plural. Let me translate it into “Texan:” “Don't ‘ya'll’ know that ‘ya'll’ are God's temple, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit?” The body Paul is talking about is the body of Christ – the church. As such, Paul claims, those divisions and disputes within the church are defiling the dwelling place of God.

While both the images of field and foundation point our eyes toward the ground, Biblical scholar N.T. Wright proposes we might be most “grounded” by this third image of temple. Wright suggests that the Temple talk in 1 Corinthians 3 is actually part and parcel of one big story - a Bible-wide narrative that began in Genesis 1 and will conclude in Revelation 21-22. The God who setup a Holy Temple in Eden “made do” with a Tabernacle in the wilderness. And even though this tabernacle was succeeded by a Temple in Jerusalem – in Zion - sin once again tore the fabric of God's relationship with his people.

Yet, God was not done. Someone was coming who would bring the glory of God back. The Gospel of John connects the dots: “The Word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ (dwelt) among us, full of grace and truth, and we have seen his glory.” (John 1:14). Jesus was the incarnate tabernacle – the temple of God. But even this was not the end point of God's desire to dwell with God's people. As Paul told the Corinthians, the Holy Spirit that came at Pentecost made all believers living temples of the Spirit of God. God made a major move to dwell again on the earth with his people.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is this full story, Paul believed, that could ground the Corinthians in what really mattered. God continues to move towards God's people – as broken and faulty as we are. And as a church, we, too, have to see the big picture of what God is doing. We have to keep our focus grounded on Jesus – what he has done and what's coming back to do - or we could be tempted to make some of the same mistakes as the Corinthians. Without the guardrail of our longstanding value of being firm in our foundation, we run the risk of claiming an identity or marketing ourselves as something we're not – as something other than Christ's church. We run the risk of becoming carnival barkers.

If you have ever been to a traveling carnival, you know what a carnival barker is. They are the pitch men standing along the sides of the boardwalk calling you to: "Step right up! Pay your money. Knock out the balloons with a dart and you'll win wonderful prizes." If you make it past the first barker, another one calls you to toss a ring on a coke bottle or to make a basket. Meanwhile, other carnival barkers call you to see things that don't require any skill from you. "Step right up! Come and see the tallest person, the shortest person, the fattest person" and so on.

The late Dr. William Self once suggested that in every city, there are churches who are like carnival barkers:

Come to our church. Our preacher doesn't wear a tie. Our preacher wears golf shirts and jogging shoes.

Come to our church. We wear shorts and sandals.

We're fundamental.

We're liturgical.

We're liberal.

We're moderate.

We're denominational.

We're mainline.

We have video.

We have snare drums and screens.

We only teach the Bible.

We're into political reform.

We're an environmentally friendly church.

We have a religious superstar preaching today.

Everyone is out front, just like the carnival barkers, pushing their style, their religious product. But when we get inside, we find that – like the carnival - no one wins the prize. No lives are changed. The church of the big idea, the church of the big action, and the church of the big deal leave us empty.^{iv}

As a church, we can be carnival barkers or we can be convicted craftsmen. We can put up four walls and a roof and call people to come and see us...or we can carefully build upon a set of convictions and call people to come see Jesus Christ. Only one of them is going to last. Only one of them will stand year after year.

Last Sunday marked my one year anniversary here at First Christian Church. I've now been here for 1/129th of this church's history – that's 0.7% of this church's life. Yet, what I've seen over the last year is that what has kept this church from careening off the road throughout its history is our value of being firm in our foundation.

- I've seen it demonstrated in the pictures of our ministers and our “Timothys and Priscillas” hanging in the hallways. Our foundation today - what happens today - comes from standing on the shoulders of generations of leaders.
- I've seen this value demonstrated in the ways we stay strong in our traditions – things like our emphasis on excellent music, singing the hymns of our faith, and celebrating the liturgy of the church year. Our worship life today dynamically connects us to the larger narrative of God's story for all of humanity.
- I've seen it in the way this congregation chose traditional architecture 60 years ago so that even the most casual passerby would see a spire pointing towards heaven and a building that's identifiable as a church.
- I've seen it in the way we emphasize God's word in worship, in study, and in community. Just as our former Pastor, The Rev. John Keevil, passed out Bibles to workers in the oil fields in the early 1920s, nearly 100 years later, we still believe the Bible has something to say to people today.

- I've seen it in the way we set a table each and every week with bread and cup, remembering not just once a month or once a quarter, but every time we gather for worship, what Jesus Christ, and him crucified, did for each of us.

And the list could go on and on.

Now, let's be clear: our value of being firm in our foundation doesn't mean immovable or inflexible – locked into one and only one way of being. The way we do church today is different from the way we did church even ten years ago. How we carry out the mission Christ has given us may change, but our reasons why we do them do not. I don't know everything that the future holds, but I know that as we move into that future, that just as we have throughout the last 129 years, we are going to anchor ourselves to Jesus Christ in everything we do.

At the end of that Spring Break week almost thirty years ago, upon what had been a bare patch of ground now stood a simple, but sturdy house. It had a solid concrete foundation and it had been carefully crafted to withstand the forces of nature that would beat upon it. And standing at the door of that house was a woman whose life had been changed because 25 youth and 10 adults spent their Spring Break giving her a solid home. This woman was so dramatically transformed by this act of service that she made it her mission to serve others. She became a commissioned minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), becoming active in women's ministry, particularly to Latina women. She wasn't transformed because she had a concrete floor. She was transformed because the spirit of Jesus Christ now firmly dwelt in her temple...in her heart. And when we let that same Spirit of Christ be the understructure for everything we do as a congregation, we might just be amazed at what a redeeming value it really is.

ⁱ Rojas, Rick. "The Church Where Believing in God Isn't Strictly Necessary." *The New York Times*. September 6, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/nyregion/the-presbyterian-church-where-believing-in-god-isnt-strictly-necessary.html>

ⁱⁱ Boring, M. Eugene and Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hoezee, Scott. "1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23" in *The Center for Excellence in Preaching*. February 13, 2017.

https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-7a/?type=lectionary_epistle

^{iv} Self, William L. *Swimming to the Deep End of the Pool*. Sermon preached September 26, 2004.

<http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=357>