

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
February 19, 2017  
©2017

## Learning from Long Ago: The Corinthian Christians and Us 6. Paul: Apostle and General Contractor

1 Corinthians 3:10-15, 18-20 10According 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- 13 the 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 up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.... 18Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. 19For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," 20and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

I may have told you the story of the only time I ever sat on a jury. It was in California and the case was a lawsuit by a number of homeowners who alleged that the builder had knowingly put in 24" posts for the foundation when the soils engineering report had mandated 72" ones. Over the years, you can probably recall regularly seeing videos of houses washing away in California rainstorms and one of the reasons is that much of the soil along coastal California has the consistency of pudding and so builders must use very long posts – sometimes as long as twenty feet or more – to stabilize the foundations. The trial whose jury I served on lasted a very long nine weeks, and I learned much, much more about foundation technology than I ever wanted to know. The builder's defense was two-fold: he said that he in fact had not put in 24" posts (a claim that was debunked when an actual post was dug up and brought into the courtroom), and, secondly, even if he did, the statute of limitations had run out so he could not be held liable. We on the jury had to decide whether he had in fact used posts that were too short and whether willful negligence on his part negated the statute of limitations. In the end, there were three options the jury could possibly

decide upon: First, to tell the homeowners they just had to live with the situation of the floors in their homes shifting by up to twelve inches over the course of the year with the inevitability of their houses some day looking like the one on our bulletin cover today. Second, the jury could have told the builder that he had to fix the foundations to stop the shifting. Or, third, we could have decided that neither of the first two options was really possible and the homeowners had no choice but to abandon their homes with their defective foundations.

Last week I talked about how Paul suddenly shifts from his very abstract and complex writing to using two simple metaphors – that of diet and of agriculture – to talk about what it means to be Christian. And today, in this the final of our Epiphany sermon series on the first few chapters of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, we hear Paul now shift to a different metaphor to explain what the life of faith needs to be like. I don’t know whether Paul was ever what we would call a general contractor, but his words suggest he indeed knew something about building houses that would stand up to the storms and shiftings of life, as he uses this metaphor of foundations – perhaps remembering that Jesus Himself had told a parable about a foolish man who built his house on sand and a wise man who built his on solid rock. A key to understanding the point that Paul is making here is found in verse 13 when he says *“the 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.”* Now, we may read such words and think – under the influence of certain kinds of American fundamentalist theology that is far too concerned with what happens at the end of time and not concerned enough about how we treat each other in the here and now – that Paul is referring only to some sort of Day of Judgment at the end of time. And it may well be that that is part of what he is thinking, but it also is clear to me – and I am sure it is to you as you reflect on your life – that each and every day brings tests to the way the

structure of your life has been built and those tests will disclose whether the foundations you have built your life on are adequate or not. Every one of us will find ourselves tested by grief. Everyone one of us will find our lives shaking when a relationship ends or love dies or serious illness intrudes. Every one of us has known plans that have gone awry, dreams that have been dashed, doors slammed shut. Now, before we continue, it's important – no, it's **essential!** – to note that such “testing” isn't inflicted on us by God; that would make God a tyrant and a bully, not a loving friend and parent. No, it is life itself that will test us all, that will sometimes shake our foundations.

What do we do? Well, it seems to me that we have the same three options that that jury I was on so long ago had. The first is to simply abandon the building. That is what millions of Americans have done in terms of the Christian faith in the last two decades. Study after study show that fewer and fewer Americans identify themselves as Christian,<sup>1</sup> and that rate of fleeing is most pronounced among the Millennial generation.<sup>2</sup> Why? Well, many of them believe that the foundation is irreparably flawed. They believe that “the church” in general has spent far too much time and effort “bashing” on gay, lesbian, and transgender folks.<sup>3</sup> They see that too many folks who call themselves Christian seem to identify with folks like Pat Robertson who this week said that those who didn't support the President are “revolting against God.”<sup>4</sup> Respectable, non-partisan research organizations show that even those Millennials who count themselves as politically conservative simply do not “get” why so much of American Christendom seems so obsessed with damning people with whom they are

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf., e.g., among many stories linking to the Pew Study:  
<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/12/living/pew-religion-study/>

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/26/millennials-gay-unaffiliated-church-religion\\_n\\_4856094.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/26/millennials-gay-unaffiliated-church-religion_n_4856094.html)

<sup>4</sup><http://www.patheos.com/blogs/progressivesecularhumanist/2017/02/pat-robertson-opposition-trump-revolt-god/>

friends and with whom they work every day. They see stories like the woman who was kicked out of her church after sixty years because her police officer daughter is lesbian,<sup>5</sup> or the Colorado church that stopped a funeral in the middle of the service when the pastor discovered the deceased was gay,<sup>6</sup> and they shake their heads in sadness. Or, even if they are not morally offended, they see too many churches whose goal seems to have become simply to take care of each other and hunker down and wait for the last person left to turn out the lights, instead of caring in word and deed for the neighbors around them who are hurting. They hear good and sincere Christians say odious things to a grieving parent like “I guess God needed your child in heaven more than you did” and can’t understand how anyone in the world would find that comforting or how such a God is anything but mean. So, they flee the house, thinking that these things are indeed glimpses of a rotten foundation on which the edifice is built and they decide they can’t, they won’t, stay in that house anymore.

Other folks take a second option and decide, whatever their misgivings about all of those things I just cited, that they will quietly continue to inhabit the house, shifting floors and all. They don’t think there’s an alternative. They may not agree with the folks who use God’s name to vilify folks who are “different,” but they don’t know quite how to speak up and they don’t know if there is another option. They decide to keep quiet and hope that mean and capricious God doesn’t decide to send misery upon them. But, living in that floor-shifting house, they are also become more and more isolated, and you and I know what isolation does to folks – it can make us more paranoid, it can make us more willing to accept conspiracy theories, it can make us more inclined to look for scapegoats for some perceived plight – the poor or the rich,

---

<sup>5</sup><http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/mom-kicked-tennessee-church-supporting-lesbian-daughter-article-1.1435249>

<sup>6</sup><http://www.denverpost.com/2015/01/13/family-church-in-lakewood-stops-womans-funeral-because-she-was-gay/>

immigrants, working class folks, black folks or white folks, rural residents or urban dwellers, and on and on. And since they are more and more isolated in their foundation-shifting houses, they have fewer and fewer people to love them, to hold them accountable for their beliefs, to reason together and work together to make the world a better, more just, more inclusive, more loving place.

Or, finally, you can fix the foundation. That's what the jury I served on required the builder of those houses to do and that is what you and I can and should do when we find that there are cracks in our foundations, when the changes and shiftings of life threaten the stability of what we think and of our faith. Paul, of course, is perhaps Christianity's most famous example of one who repaired his own foundation. Many of you know the story: in the early days of the Church, Paul was among the most zealous in the persecution of Christians. He supervised the stoning to death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. After that, he was on his way to Damascus apparently to go door-to-door to root out Christians and jail or kill them when he had his vision on the road to Damascus: the figure of Jesus appeared to him and he became convinced and convicted that he was wrong. From then on he understood himself to be appointed as the one to bring the good news of the gospel to the non-Jewish world. But notice something: Paul never entirely abandoned his house and its foundation. No, he fixed that foundation, painfully ripping out the joists and beams that were rotten and rebuilding on what he, as we have seen, called "the foolishness of the cross." But he never abandoned his identity as a Jew either, for he knew that at the base of Judaism was an unflinching commitment to a God of grace and love, an unflinching devotion to caring for and treating with respect and equality the immigrant and the stranger, and a fierce determination not to let fear rule over life. Those parts of Paul's foundation were strong and secure indeed, and they were soon to be tied to Paul's new understanding that, in Christ, everyone now could know the grace and love and justice of God in the

same way the Jewish people had always known and continue to know to this day.

The verdict that my California jury came to was to require the builder to go into each house, remove the flooring, and one by one by one, extricate those substandard piers and one at a time replace them with new piers that were long enough to tie into the bedrock far below. It didn't happen overnight. It was not easy work at all. But it allowed those homeowners to dwell once again in houses that were now more solid than they ever had been before.

It is the same with you and me. Every one of us has built our lives on foundations that, in places, need to be torn up and re-done. My wife Barbara's mother once responded to someone who was attempting to excuse some terrible prejudice with the statement "Well, that's just the way I was raised." Her mother said, "Well, some of us have gone beyond – and want to go beyond – the way we were raised." That's true for me, and I hope it's true for you – not to repudiate but to repair, not to renounce but to rehabilitate. There is indeed so much about the foundations on which my life and my faith were raised that remain in good shape: the land around my Texas childhood home reminds me of the prairies of eastern Colorado and the foothills of the Front Range. Those experiences, those foundations, help me continue to know that, in the words of the great hymn, "all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres." The loving grownups of my childhood church – many now sadly passing – embodied for me how to respect and take seriously the hopes and dreams of youth and that is a part of my foundation that I hope has stayed solid and sturdy. My parents showed me glimpses of God as they were always ready to open their doors and their dinner table to the folks we would bring home, no matter how "different" they might have been, and thus my foundation of knowing that God is first and last a God of hospitality was strengthened.

But there were other parts of my foundation that needed repairing, sometimes

painfully, and almost always never an instant thing. The casual racism that infected my culture also made for a shaky foundation in me, and while I will not claim that I have pulled out all those rotten piers, I am grateful for men and women of every ethnicity and race who have helped me do the hard and painful and oh-so-fulfilling work of trading many of those piers for ones that more solidly mirror God's love for each and all. Mean-spirited theologies that were all around me as a child unconsciously invaded and hobbled my foundations, and by the grace of many saints I have been able to repair those brittle piers with ones that ground my understanding of God as the One is never mean-spirited, never capricious, never desiring anything but the good for all God's creatures. I suspect you could join me in naming both the things in your foundation that you are grateful for and the things that you are glad that you were able to replace at some point with better and sturdier underpinnings. But it's a task that needs to continue for you and for me. It's why we have church, to hold us accountable, to point out the rotten piers, to make us better people. It's why Darryl led a no-doubt sometimes uncomfortable month's class on the racism that still finds its way into our lives. Writer and poet Maya Angelou makes this wonderful observation: In my life, she says, "*I'm **trying** to be a Christian. I'm **working at it**, and I'm amazed when people walk up to me and say, I'm a Christian.' I think, 'Already? Wow!'"*

There is not a one of us who can say "Yes, already!" For all of our foundations have their cracks; they all have their unsteady places, their too shallow footings. Yet together and with prayer and supplication we are called to continue to have our foundations ever-more-truly be that same foundation that Paul spoke of: "*...no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.*" It is the Jesus through Whom we know indeed God loves each and all and Who asks that **we** behave and believe in ways that express that love and never a hateful or exclusionary view of God, AND that God demands justice for each and all

and asks our best efforts to do right by all those neighbors that God has made. May it be so. Amen.