



THE CHURCH THE WORLD NEEDS | JUST THE HELP

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When I was 18-years-old and a freshman at Princeton, I took a civil engineering course for liberal arts majors, not only with Ashley, but also my grandfather. My grandfather was a civil engineer and he lived near campus, so he audited this class with me. Twice a week, I would go to a lecture with my future wife and my grandfather. The class was focused on skyscrapers and bridges. As part of the final project, you had to choose any structure in the world and analyze how it was made, do the math and determine whether or not it is structurally sound and what kind of forces it could withstand. Professor David Billington had taught this class for decades, and there's a renowned story about one of his former students.

The Citicorp Center at 53rd Street and Lexington Avenue, just 10 blocks south of here, was built in 1977. It was the seventh largest building in the world at the time, and it's unique not only for its 45-degree-angle slanted roof, but also because the bottom nine floors are stilts. It's literally a skyscraper built on stilts, suspended over St. Peter's Lutheran Church. Now it doesn't look very sturdy, but it must be because otherwise, you wouldn't build it, right? One year after its construction, one of Professor Billington's undergraduate students made that the focus of her senior thesis and so she did the kind of work that we were required to do in the course. She ran the numbers and did the math to find out whether or not it was structurally sound. Normally, the corners of buildings are the strongest part of the structure, and it is winds that hit the face of the building head-on that create the greatest strain, but this is not your typical building because it's a skyscraper on stilts. This undergraduate student found out that the building was actually vulnerable to winds that hit the building diagonally, and based on the kind of storms that roll through New York every few years, she figured out that every year, there was a one in 16 chance of the building falling down, and it turns out she was right. The famous architect who designed this building caught wind, no pun intended, of her research and unbeknownst to her, informed the NYPD of this problem. They created an evacuation plan that extended across a 10 block radius. They put 2,500 Red Cross volunteers on notice, and then the company quietly, without informing the building occupants, began the work to strengthen the foundation as Hurricane Ella was barreling up the East Coast. They were able to get the work done, and the hurricane never made landfall, but it's hard to imagine how they got away with this. Perhaps it's only because the newspapers were on strike at the same time that nobody heard about this story until it was reported 20 years later in the *New Yorker*.

Sadly, neither Ashley nor I discovered a hidden design flaw and saved a skyscraper from total collapse, but if ever there was a story about the importance of having a solid foundation, it's this one. That is the central theme in the section of Paul's letter that we are looking at in 1 Corinthians. For those of you who may be just tuning in, here's a little bit of the backstory. The Apostle Paul traveled to the Greek city of Corinth in the year 50 AD. He shared the Gospel of Jesus, and many people received the message and became Christians. Paul founded the church in Corinth. He ended

up staying there in the city for 18 months—longer than he had previously stayed anywhere else—but after that year and a half, he travelled across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus. That's where the trouble began because while he's in Ephesus, he receives a report that the church that he had worked so hard to build was now in danger of falling apart. The church had split into factions. They had divided around these cults of personality. They were abusing their spiritual gifts and their freedom in Christ in order to do whatever they wanted, and as a result, they were living their lives no differently, and in many ways quite worse than their neighbors.

Many churches today, like the one in Corinth, are struggling to survive. Central was one of those churches just 15 years ago. If a church is in danger of collapse, stemming from leadership issues or design flaws, then you need to pay attention to the foundation. That's precisely what Paul does here in the letter that he dashes off from Ephesus—the letter that we know as 1 Corinthians. Through this letter, Paul shows us the kind of church the world needs. He shows us what the church can and should be, and specifically in the section before us today, he uses a number of different metaphors to describe not only the church, but also what it means to engage in Christian ministry. He describes the church as, on the one hand a field, and on the other hand a building. What I'd like to do is take a closer look at this passage, and consider what it can tell us about who we are, what we're supposed to do, and how.

If you'd like, you can open up a Bible or you can turn to the program where the Scripture passage is written. I'll be reading from 1 Corinthians 3:5-15,

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

¹⁰According 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. ¹¹For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³each 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. ¹⁴If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

This is God's word. It's trustworthy, and it's true, and it's given to us in love.

Who We Are

All Christians are called to ministry. It's not as if the work of the church is reserved for professional Christians like myself. All Christians are indwelt by God's Holy Spirit. All Christians are granted unique gifts to serve. All Christians are called to help build up the body of the church and to participate in God's mission in the world. There's no place for a consumer mentality. We're not supposed to just be consumers of

religious goods and services. No, we're all called to be producers. We're called to be producers of God's love and grace and truth in the lives of others. The question that is before all of us is: who are we as Christian workers? As a refresher, let me remind you that after Paul spent those 18 months in Corinth and went to Ephesus, he met a man named Apollos who had originally come from Alexandria in Egypt. Apollos was not only brilliant and well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures, but he was an incredibly gifted communicator. After he meets Paul, he makes his own trip to Corinth in order to encourage the believers there to help build up the church. I love what Acts 18:27 says about Apollos. It says "he greatly helped those who through grace had believed." That's a side note, but the point here is that they believed through grace. Even faith is a gift. So he encouraged them to grow in their faith because of the gifts that had been entrusted to him. Even though he didn't stay in Corinth very long, there are many people who attached themselves to Apollos because of his knowledge, his wisdom of the Scriptures, and his charismatic personality. Although by the time Paul writes this letter to Corinth, Apollos is back in Ephesus with him.

The issue is that we think celebrity culture is something of a modern phenomenon, but what we see in the Corinthian correspondence is that this is something that plagued the early church from the very start. People were creating cults of personality around certain leaders, and they were putting them up on pedestals. Paul addresses this issue, but he's being very, very delicate here. He's careful to avoid naming names. There were people in Corinth who were loyal to Paul and loyal to Apollos, but that wasn't the real issue. The real issue was with the people that Paul doesn't mention, the ones whose names would have been too sensitive to put in writing. Paul diffuses this whole situation around these cults of personality by writing, "What then is Apollos? What then is Paul?" Now that's a striking way of putting it because he deliberately chooses to say, *what* rather than *who*. He says, *what is Apollos? What is Paul*, not *who*. He's being quite emphatic here. It's almost like a disruptive child being brought into the principal's office, and the principal says, *well, what do we have here?* Not *who* but *what*. How does Paul answer that question? What is Apollos? What is Paul? Only servants. "Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each." The word for servant there is literally the word "waiter." People who serve tables. Paul is saying, what are we? We're only servants. We literally are just the help. Then in v.9, Paul introduces the first of these two images to describe the church. He says, "You are God's field." This one image doesn't tell us everything that we might want to know about Christian leadership or ministry, so what is Paul driving at?

There are three main activities that must take place in order for a field to produce a healthy crop. You have to plant seeds, you have to water the seeds, and then you have to cause those seeds to sprout. Paul applies that metaphor to the situation in Corinth, and in v.6-7 he said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." Paul was the first one to tell the Corinthians about Jesus, and then Apollos followed Paul and encouraged these fledgling Christians in their faith. Both had an important role to play, and their roles were interdependent. There's no point in planting seeds if you're not going to water them. There's no point in watering the ground unless you have previously planted seeds. This work goes together. That's why he says in v.8-9, "He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according

to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers." They're in this together. They might have had different jobs, but ultimately they're committed to the same task. They're committed to the same goal—to make the church grow. To build it up. They deserve, therefore, to be recognized for their efforts. They "each will receive their wages according to their labor." Of course, Paul here is not talking about being recognized by human beings, but by being recognized by God—the only one whose opinion really matters. At the end of the day, Paul says, *look, we're just servants*. "Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each."

The Corinthians became Christians through the ministry of Paul and Apollos. That's a big deal. That's nothing to be scoffed at. Their role as leaders was not irrelevant, but the point that Paul wants to make here is they can't take any credit for it because even if you do everything right, with planting and watering, you can't cause things to grow. Only God can do that. That's true of all of us. No matter how much effort we might put forth into the enterprise that God has called us to, it's useless apart from God. Everything we do apart from him is useless without his blessing. God is the one who gives the growth. Jesus himself said the exact same thing in Luke 17:10. He said, "When you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" If you do find yourself from time to time feeling a little slighted or unrecognized, or perhaps underappreciated, you might want to ask yourself, *why is this so important to me? What audience am I trying to impress?* because God sees. God knows even if no one else notices. So the real question is not *who are we*, but *what?* We are only servants. We're just waiters. We're just serving tables. We really are just the help.

What We Are Supposed To Do

If that is who we are, then what are we supposed to do? Paul addresses that second question by shifting the image. He shifts from this agricultural image to an architectural image. First he says, "You are God's field" now he says you are "God's building." We are all called, therefore, to use whatever gifts we have to help build up the church. We have to do whatever is going to edify—that's one of Paul's favorite words in the letter to the Corinthians. Whether Paul's talking about cultivating a field, or constructing a building, Paul emphasizes that this is a team effort. Just as there is one who plants and another who waters, there is one who lays the foundation and another who builds on top of it. So in v.10, Paul specifically says, "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." Here, Paul doesn't specifically mention Apollos because Apollos wasn't the only person who followed Paul in Corinth. There were others. There were other teachers, some good, some bad, which goes to show that not all contractors are alike. If you've done any work in New York City, you know that that's the case. Paul goes on to say, therefore, because that is the reality, "let each one take care how he builds." What kind of carefulness does Paul have in mind here? He wants us to focus first on the foundation, and then secondly, on the superstructure.

He zeroes in, first of all, on the foundation. Like Citicorp Center, if there is a design flaw, if your foundation is not sound, then you better make it right or else disaster might strike. It's worth thinking about this, first of all, at a personal level. Everybody has to base their life on something. Something must form the center of their life. This

is what your life is all about. This is what gives your life meaning and purpose. It could be romantic love. It could be family. It could be career success. It could be critical acclaim, health and wellness, or pursuing a life of pleasure, comfort, and ease. From the outside, it might appear that the structure of your life is sound. It might seem as if you've got everything put together, but there could be a hidden design flaw. If that's the case, then all it takes is for a storm to hit and the strong crosswinds can completely knock you out. The question I want you to consider is, is your life structurally sound? Because what Paul wants us to consider here is that there is no other foundation for human life other than Jesus Christ that can withstand the hurricane force winds that will hit you, if they haven't already. There is only one foundation, and that is Jesus Christ.

We should think about that at a personal level, but Paul specifically is focused on the corporate level. He's focused on the kind of foundation that churches are built on. We all know that there are plenty of churches out there that are at this point unrecognizable as Christian churches because the foundation has so substantially shifted. Any Christian ministry though, and any Christian church that is worth its salt, will at least say that it is centered on Christ, but here's the problem. Many people assume that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the foundation of the church, in theory, but they emphasize something else in practice. If you assume that the gospel is the foundation in theory, but emphasize something else in practice, then it will lead to a shift in your foundation. There will be a crack in the foundation. Think about it like this. Of course, as a church, we want Christians to live ethical lives. We want them to pursue God's call to justice. We want them to engage the world around them and try to make a positive difference in our time. But if you overemphasize *moral behavior* to the detriment of the gospel, then you're going to slide into *legalism*. If you overemphasize *God's call to justice*, you'll slide into *political activism*. If you overemphasize *engaging culture*, you'll slide into *cultural triumphalism*. You'll find yourself caught up in this never ending culture wars. This is subtle, but you can lose the gospel simply by over emphasizing good things. If you overemphasize good things, they turn out to be the wrong thing. You can lose the gospel by over emphasizing good things. That is why we must keep Jesus, crucified and risen, as the foundation of our church, of our ministry as well as our individual lives. That means we need to keep coming back to this again and again and again. The crucified and risen Jesus is the vital center out of which every aspect of Christian life flows.

We've got to make sure that the foundation is sound, but then the other way in which Paul wants us to be careful, is about the superstructure that we build on top of that foundation. He next focuses on the materials that we might use in construction as a metaphor for the different kinds of teaching that we might offer to one another. In v.12, he says that in the end, there's really only two possibilities. Either your teaching will prove to be valuable and durable, or your teaching will prove to be cheap and perishable. It'll either be proven to be valuable and durable, like gold and silver and precious stone, perhaps he's thinking of something like marble. Or it will be proven to be cheap and perishable, like wood, hay or straw. He takes what we teach one another very seriously. The materials that represent true Christian teaching are able to withstand not only the test of time, but also the day when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. Listen to how Paul puts it in v.13-15, he says, "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. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

Every last one of us is going to have to stand before God, at the end of time on the day that he has determined, and give an account for our lives. Paul uses the imagery of fire to suggest that we will be tested. The purity and the quality of our lives, our hearts and our works, the things that we've done and said, will be tested as through fire. A Christian is someone who says, *God accepts me, not because of who I am or what I've done, not because of what I believe or what I have taught, but solely because of who Jesus is, and what he has done for me.* That is the gospel. That's what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is someone who undergoes a transfer of trust. You no longer trust in yourself, but you put all your trust in Jesus for your standing before God. If you have put your trust in Jesus, then you know that when you stand before him, the verdict has already come in. You know what he's going to say to you on that day. He will declare you not guilty, but innocent, righteous. You can have absolute assurance today that you will be acquitted when you stand before God on that day, not because of who you are or what you've done, but solely because of who Jesus is and what he has done for you. Just because the verdict has already come in, doesn't mean that you can skip the trial. We still will stand before God, and he will test our works, the things that we have done and the things that we have said, the things that we have taught, the things that we've passed on to others.

Here's the important thing. What I want you to notice is that Paul, specifically in this passage, is talking about Christians. He's talking about what Christians have taught. He's not talking about false teachers or false teaching. He's talking about Christians—what we pass on to one another. He says, look, if your teaching is made of the good stuff, then it will endure the trial. It will stand the test. It will come through the fire, and you will receive a reward. He's not talking about a reward in this life of money, fame, status, power, or recognition. He's talking about a future reward—a reward not from human beings, but from God. You'll hear God saying: "well done." Well done, good and faithful servant. You've been faithful, in a little I'll set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. If your teaching is made of the good stuff, it'll stand the test, but if your teaching is cheap, it will be burned up. You will suffer loss. He says, you'll still be saved. You'll be saved, but only through fire or as we might put it, "only by the skin of your teeth."

What I want you to notice here is that this is serious. What Paul is saying here is serious, and this is why I'm so conscientious about what we teach at Central. I care a whole lot not about only what is said from this pulpit, but also what is communicated in our Children's Ministry or in our Youth Ministry or in our Community Groups or our Bible Studies, because it has to be consistent all the way through. It's got to be made out of the good stuff. The stuff that will stand the test of time and endure on that day. It's not just me. It's all of us. We're all responsible for what we pass on and teach to one another. The question is whether or not our teaching is the kind of stuff that will build up and edify the church, or it will be proven to be rather flimsy on the last day.

How We Are Supposed To Do It

We've considered who we are and what we're supposed to do, but how are we supposed to do it? Very briefly, let me bring these images together, and see what we might be able to learn from them. The main point here is that Paul is trying to downplay the importance of human leaders. If we were to ask that question, who are we? We really are merely servants, unworthy servants who have only done our duty. We are just waiters. We really are just the help because God is the one who counts. Only God is the one who can make things grow. Did you also notice that at the same time, Paul says in v.10, "like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation," and the only foundation that can be laid is Jesus Christ—like a skilled master builder. The word skilled there is literally the word *wise*. Paul is a *wise* master builder. On the one hand, we are servants. We really are just the help, and yet at the same time, Paul can say that he's a skilled wise master builder, and therefore we should listen to him because he knows what he's talking about. He's a waiter, but he's not just a waiter who brings the food out from the kitchen. He's also like a fine waiter, who knows the best dishes to order.

We should listen to Paul because he knows what he's talking about. He laid the foundation, the only kind of foundation that will stand the test of time. We should listen to him not because he's fixated on himself. We should listen to him, actually, for the very opposite reason, because he's fixated on directing people's attention away from himself to Jesus. Paul does not care about winning some kind of popularity contest. In the Christian life, there's only one person who belongs on top of a pedestal, and that person is Jesus. When Jesus climbs on top of the pedestal that God had set out for him, it turns out that his pedestal was not some column made out of marble, but rather, it was a wooden cross. That cross shows us what God really thinks about human wisdom, or power, or fame, or popularity. He passes judgment on all of these things. If you want to be something great in the kingdom of God, then you have to join Jesus on his pedestal. Join him on a cross.

Let me pray for us.

Father God, we thank you that through Paul's letters, he shows us what the church can and should be. Like his church in his day, there's so many in our own that are tottering. They're in danger of collapse, because they're suffering from leadership issues or design flaws. Help us, father, to shore up our foundation by making sure that we are structurally sound because we are centered on Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. We pray that the teaching that we pass on to one another would serve to build up the church and be proven to be of the right stuff that not only stands the test of time, but will also endure on the day when you test the secrets of our hearts, the quality of our works. Lord, we pray that you would help us to remember that we really are unworthy servants, just doing our duty. We really are nothing more than the help because God and God alone is the one who gives the growth. We ask that you would hear our prayers and help us to be the people you've called us to be by your grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.