

**“The Foundation”**

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Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

## 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

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. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

12 Now 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. 14 If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. 15 If the work is burned up, 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? 17 If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

18 Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written,

“He catches the wise in their craftiness,” 20 and again,  
“The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”

21 So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, 23 and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD FOUNDATION

The church I served in North Carolina built a Habitat House. We raised the funds. The foundation was poured, and we began to build.

A retired master carpenter helped us frame the house on that foundation, and I was impressed by his attention to detail. I could readily see that if he didn't know what he was doing, if he didn't build the house very precisely, according to the foundation that had already been laid, we would have been in deep trouble.

But, fortunately he was very skilled.

He knew how to read the blueprints, and he led us step by step through the construction process. A building needs a good foundation and the services of a master carpenter in order for the building to be sound.

Perhaps you have been in a house that had been build poorly or had foundation problems.

The floor slopes to one side. There may be gaps in the wall.

If a building has a faulty foundation or is constructed in a haphazard fashion, it won't be long before you will be able to see the problem.

Many years ago they built a new high school in McDowell County, WV. And I had the opportunity to visit that school shortly after it was finished.

The land was donated by a coal company that had been doing strip mining.

And the County was so excited about getting the land for free that they forgot to take one important step.

They didn't test the land on which the foundation was laid.

Big mistake.

The ground underneath the school was not solid due to all the mining that had taken place over the years.

Soon after the building was opened flaws began to appear.

Cracks opened up. Doors wouldn't close.

And the floor in that building

(I tell you, I have never seen anything like it!)

... it looked like a series of waves.

Buildings must have a sound foundation.

And then, a master carpenter must make sure that building materials are carefully selected and properly installed.

There can be no shortcuts if you want a building that will stand the test of time.

## THE CHURCH'S FOUNDATION

Paul said that the church is like a building.

It needs a strong foundation, and it needs to be carefully built using high quality materials.

If we don't do that, when the time of testing comes, the church will fail.

So who or what forms the foundation for the church?

I bet most of you already know.

We're even going to sing about in our next hymn.

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, the Lord.

But, the church at Corinth seems to have forgotten this.

Remember that Paul wrote this letter because he had received some very troubling news.

The saints at Corinth were divided over leadership.

"Some said I follow Paul.

Some said I follow Apollos.

Some said I follow Peter."

They had turned the church into a personality cult.

And it was tearing the church apart.

Sadly this is still a problem.

I remember a church in North Carolina that got a new pastor.

He was a very charismatic and enthusiastic person.

And his ministry made a big difference in that that church.

It grew dramatically. They built large buildings.

They developed new programs.

They changed the name of that church to eliminate any denominational labels.

(They didn't want anyone to reject coming to that church because of a particular stance on doctrine. That's a common strategy these days, by the way.)

Sadly, that last move seemed to be a mistake. All of the original members left the church because they wanted to keep their name.

And besides that, they thought the pastor was just changing too many things.

But, despite that setback, the church continued to blossom and grow ... until that charismatic minister left.

Not too many years after that pastor left, I heard that the church had closed its doors for good. There were too few members to service the debt on that huge building.

Despite the hard work of a very effective minister, apparently that church had forgotten one important thing.

The church's one foundation is not Paul or Apollos or Peter or any other minister.

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ the Lord.

The church at Corinth was divided divided because they were trying to build on someone other than the foundation laid by Jesus. There was only one human being who could convey the message and presence of God.

And that was Jesus.

Now the church in North Carolina that folded didn't know that they had this problem.

And I'm sure that the minister of that church didn't want it to happen.

I knew him.

He was a good preacher and a dedicated Christian.

But, somehow, just as it happened to the church at Corinth, the people had come to rely too much on him instead of relying on the Lord.

He was the glue that held that congregation together. And so, when he left, the church fell apart.

## SEARCHING FOR THE PERFECT MINISTER

I've seen many Presbyterian Churches struggle with this same issue, especially those churches who have had a long and successful pastorate. They want a new minister that is just like their old minister.

It never happens. We're all different.

And the search for the perfect leader often leads to disappointment and conflict.

That's why we require churches without a pastor to first do a mission study. In that study the church is supposed to basically ask and answer two questions.

First, "What is God calling us to do in this place?"

And second, "What kind of pastor do we need to lead us in that effort?"

Quite often the first question is not given much attention.

In essence they say,

"We think that we know what God is calling us to do.

It's what we're already doing and what we used to do. Right?"

So, if they answer the first question that way, then what kind of pastor do they want?

They want a pastor who will keep the things we like and restore those things that have gone downhill.

For example, if we used to have a good youth group, then we want a young pastor who can bring that back.

But, not all members will agree with that assessment.

Some will want a pastor who will pay more attention to the older folks.  
And then others will want a pastor who will be a good administrator.

Some will say, "Now we've got to have a good preacher."

Others will say, "I hope the new pastor will not be in to those new forms of worship.

We don't need a rock and roll at church."

And then someone will object,

"If we don't modernize our church and start bringing young people into our church, we're soon going to close our doors forever. After all they're the future of the church."

And so it goes.

Old friends become divided over leadership.

Some follow Paul.

Some follow Apollos.

Some follow Peter.

No matter who the Pastor Nominating Committee brings to the congregation, someone is going to be unhappy.

As one pastor said when he preached his first sermon, "I'm going to make all of you happy at one time or another. Some of you will be happy to see me come. And some of you will be happy when I finally leave."

## GOD'S TEMPLE

The church needs good leaders. But, the church also needs a sense of mission. We have to take the time to really answer that first question we ask during the mission study.

What is God calling us to do in this place?

Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are God's Temple and that God's Spirit resides in them.

As the Book of Order puts it,

“The church’s life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ’s ongoing life and work.”

So how can we do that?

How can we live up to that high calling?

How can we know if we are participating in Christ’s ongoing life and work?

That’s a question needs to be asked not only by a church that is looking for a minister.

That question needs to be asked by every church, every minister and every Christian.

We are God’s Temple, and that means we are holy.

That means we have been called according to God’s purpose. God loves us and has a plan for our lives.

But, the tricky part is this: that plan is subject to change.

What God is calling us to do evolves over time.

We must respond in new ways to what is going on in our world and in our lives.

Two things are necessary for that to happen.

First, we must be sensitive and open to the work of the Spirit in our life.

Our Scripture for today tells us that we are God’s Temple because God’s Spirit resides in us. It’s like that praise and worship song, “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.” We need to believe that promise and open ourselves to the leading of the Spirit.

The second thing that needs to happen is that our actions must be grounded in a thorough understanding of the gospel. The Spirit will not lead us in a direction that contradicts the clear teaching of God’s Word.

Throughout the history of the church people have claimed the leading of the Spirit but then have promoted viewpoints that contradicted the clear

teaching of Christ. We must be open to the Spirit's leading but we must evaluate what we do against the standard set by Jesus.

A famous liberal preacher once said that we ought to preach with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other hand. I think he had a point. Our preaching must be relevant and related to the issues of the day.

On the other hand I'm afraid that balance is hard to maintain.

A lot of liberal preaching I've heard has a lot of newspaper and very little Bible.

And lately that's also become true of many conservative preachers as well.

Some of you may remember comedian Flip Wilson. He had a riff in which he claimed to be the pastor of the "Church of What's Happening Now." We are always in danger of making that comedy riff into reality if we do not base our mission upon God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

Last week we discussed the fact that the church is always in danger of adopting the values of the culture instead of the values of the gospel. Sometimes our mistakes are easy to recognize. But, sometimes our mistakes are subtle.

Using religious language we can justify almost anything.

The church can become nothing more than a tool for promoting our own desires and need to win at all costs.

That's what happened at Corinth.

The church was divided over leadership.

The church was divided over theology.

The church was divided over morality.

They were divided because they were confused about what was most important.

Everyone wanted something a little bit different.

Some wanted a great preacher.

Some wanted a great teacher.

Some wanted to go back to that good old time religion, Judaism.

## THE FOUNDATION OF FORGIVENESS

The answer to their problem?

Paul said, "Go back to the basics.

Remember that the foundation of the church is not morality or great leaders or even theology. The foundation of the church is just this,

'In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.'"

That is what Paul calls the message of the cross.

It is at the center of our faith and life.

Everything else is just commentary.

If we do as Paul suggests, if we return to Jesus, if we put the cross at the center of our theology, I think we will begin to understand the mission of the church in a different way.

We will have a renewed and deepened emphasis the message of grace and forgiveness.

That message will allow our faith to be reborn.

And, most importantly, it will allow us to look at each other in a new way.

We are not competitors.

We are tending the same garden.

As Paul put it in the first part of this chapter,

"I planted. Apollos watered.

But, God gave the growth."

We have the same purpose.

We're on the same team ... so to speak.

We are brothers and sisters forgiven and freed to live a new and different way.

And we are called to develop a community that reflects God's amazing grace.

The details of how we do it may vary, but the foundation, the goal of the church remains the same.

Every day we have to think about this.

We have to apply the basics of the gospel to our lives in a concrete way.

And I would suggest that we do this by asking ourselves some very honest and difficult questions.

Questions like:

Who do I need to forgive?

Can I admit it when I've failed?

Am I humble enough to ask for and receive the grace of God?

Am I also humble enough to also ask for and receive the forgiveness of others?

## THE STRONG MAN

The church at Corinth had a hard time understanding and accepting this. The reason?

They thought that they were just fine the way they were.

They did not have a proper understanding of sin and this led to a misunderstanding of what it meant to be a disciple of Christ.

Why did they glorify certain charismatic leaders instead of glorifying Christ?

It was because they did not understand the message of the cross. They did not realize that they were in desperate need of forgiveness.

Human beings always want a strong "man" to take over and give them security in an uncertain world.

This is how tyrants sometimes are able to take over a country. It's why we are so excited or so dismayed when our political candidate wins or loses.

And this is how churches are sometimes dominated by a strong and charismatic leader.

In the case of the church at Corinth, those strong leaders did nothing wrong.

The problem was in how the people responded to those leaders. They began to trust in the messenger instead of the message.

They began to trust in the disciples instead of the Master.

Paul responded to this misunderstanding in this way. He said,

“God has given you many things. God has given you leaders, Paul and Apollos and Peter. God has given you life and all the things that you enjoy.”

Yet, one day all those leaders will be gone.  
One day the life that you love will change.  
And finally death comes to us all.

So ... don't trust in human leaders.  
Don't trust in what you have accumulated in this life.

Trust in the fact that you belong to Christ.  
Trust in the fact that God was in Christ and that “in life and in death, we belong to God.”

I guess we do trust in a strong man after all.  
We just need to trust in the right strong man.

His name is not Paul or Apollos or Peter.

His name is Jesus.

When the world turned it's back on God's love and the sun refused to shine, only Jesus had the strength to look down from the cross and say,

“Father, forgive them.”

His grace is the foundation upon which the church is built.

Let us build upon that foundation.

Amen.