

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Epiphany 7 – February 20th and 23rd, 2014

1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 (NIV – 1984)

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future--all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

Dear Friends in Christ,

I've seen some pretty incredible church buildings in my lifetime and I am sure that many of you have also seen some wonderful churches. In Charlotte, NC just around the corner from our little WELS Church, there was a very large Church that was built out of pink granite that had windows and peaks that were literally hundreds of feet high. It sat thousands of people at one time and cost around \$29 million dollars to build. I've seen some pretty ornate churches in Milwaukee and even here in Watertown

As nice as any of these churches are, I was watching a TV show in great Churches and I saw a program on what has to be one of the more magnificent churches in all the world. It is the cathedral in Cologne, Germany. The foundation for this building was laid in 1248. In a mere 74 years (1322) the first part of the building was completed and they built a "temporary" wall to seal it off so that section could be used for worship. In 1473 one of the towers was capped with a crane to assist them in the work. The crane remained on the tower for 400 years while construction continued intermittently. The bells were put in the towers in the 1870s, the largest of which weighed 24 tons, and the whole cathedral was completed in 1880, 632 years after the project began.

Archbishop Konrad von Hochstaden gets mentioned as the one who laid the foundation stone for this beautiful building, but obviously this took a team of skilled architects to plan. More architects with equal skill were needed throughout the centuries of the construction phase to understand and apply changing building technics to bring this project to a finish.

Where is the impressive "cathedral" the Apostle Paul was talking about when he said: **"I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it"** (1 Corinthians 3:10)? Of course, there isn't one. As much as a building can be impressive, and even help us focus our attention on our mighty God, a building is not the church. **"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ," says Paul (1 Corinthians 3:11).**

Now we've been singing and hearing a lot about churches and firm foundations this morning, but we're obviously not here to talk about well-poured foundations and large and beautiful churches. But these pictures of large churches built on solid foundations however, are good illustrations of the foundation that our faith is built on. It is this picture of foundations that will serve as theme for today:

Theme: God Wants A Church Built On Christ

- 1. Jesus is the only foundation**
- 2. This foundation will last forever**

On what foundation is your church built? You realize that we are not talking about real buildings. We are talking about God's Church which is in people's hearts. Is your church built to last on the immovable rock of Christ or is it slowly crumbling with the poor foundation of the wisdom of this world? Like an expert builder, St. Paul takes us down to the foundation of the church and shows us what God wants.

Paul spent his ministry building foundations. Now he likely never laid a physical foundation for a building. In fact, Paul was more of a tent-maker by trade, but the Lord gave him a specific task — to lay the foundation for Christian congregations in cities and towns across modern-day Turkey, Greece, and beyond. Paul spent up to three years in certain cities, before moving on to lay the foundation for another congregation elsewhere. He left behind capable "builders" to continue building up each congregation with the true teaching of God's Word. That's exactly what Paul had done in the Greek city of Corinth. **"By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it."**

On what foundation was their church built? What material did Paul use to lay a foundation that would last for eternity? Paul used a material that was unheard of in Corinth and really in any of the cities and towns where he labored for the Lord. The material he used far surpassed any man-made material in strength, flexibility in use, and durability. This material was so strong that even all the forces of hell combined could not destroy it. Paul described his building material. **"We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."** (1 Corinthians 1:23-24)

Paul used the simple, yet powerful message of Christ crucified to build churches—a building material considered offensive and foolish by many, but the only material God himself wanted for his church. **"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ."** Proclaiming the good news of Christ crucified as the only way for our salvation was the only acceptable way for Paul to lay the foundation for a congregation no matter where or when it happened.

Let's take a closer look at that material of Christ crucified. To help us remember this, I want you to think about the account from Jesus' life when Jesus commended Peter's answer to the question, **"Who do you say that I am?"** Peter responded for himself and the other apostles, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** Jesus commended this answer, not because Peter came up with it, but because it was **"revealed to you...by my Father in heaven...and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."**(Matthew 16:15-18) Jesus wasn't going to build his church on Peter or some other human teacher, but on the truth which he confessed. Jesus is the Son of God who came to seek and to save the lost. Jesus was God's "Chosen One" sent to live and give his life for the sins of all.

This would be the message that Peter and Paul and all the apostles and countless other believers would proclaim in the centuries that followed. They would lay the foundation of Christ crucified. The Holy Spirit would work through their message to build up Christ's Church, not with bricks and mortar, but souls saved through faith in Christ. Paul explains what that means even for us today. **"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."** (Ephesians 2:19-22)

It's an amazing building material, and what a firm foundation that material gives! The true teaching of God's Word and the faithful confession of Christ Jesus as our only Lord and Savior lay a foundation so firm that the church on which it sits can endure the worst storms of this life, the attacks of the sinful world outside, and even the attacks of sinful natures within. Satan and all of hell can rage against it, but to no avail.

At times, it doesn't seem that way. The faithful teaching of Christ crucified is put down as a foolish, misguided teaching of the past that doesn't apply today. Christianity is dismissed on the one hand and hated on the other. Satan uses every opportunity to cause division between individual believers, and within Christian congregations and church bodies. Our sinful natures attack us individually as we bear the cross of confessing Christ with all the discomfort, suffering, and ridicule it entails. At times, those who remain

faithful to the true teaching of Christ crucified seem like such a small group that a gentle breeze could wipe them out. Yet the Church still stands. In fact, as the hymnwriter wrote in our hymn we just sang,

“The Church shall never perish. Her dear Lord, to defend, to guide, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end. Though there be those that hate her and strive to see her fail, against both foe and traitor she ever shall prevail.” (Christian Worship 538:3)

How is that possible? How does a church endure and even grow in the midst of suffering and persecution, in the face of heresy and attack, or even when hearts grow cold? Look to the foundation on which your church is built. Is it built on Christ? Is the faithful confession of Christ crucified and the faithful teaching of Law and Gospel the foundation of your church? If it is, then no matter what we face, David’s words in (Psalm 62:1-2) will be true of us, **“My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.”**

That was the kind of foundation Paul sought to lay in every city, but Paul has a warning for us lest we be filled with pride over our firm foundation. **“Each one should be careful how he builds.”** You see, it’s very tempting for a Christian congregation or a Christian church body or even an individual Christian to seek other materials on which to build — cheaper materials that take less effort and mean less suffering for the user. Perhaps it’s the brittle material of the wisdom of this world that denies that God’s Word has any real authority or is free of human error or comes from God himself. Such wisdom denies that Jesus is true God or that he could do miracles or create the world or that he was born of a virgin or raised from the dead. Instead it sees Jesus as a radical or moral teacher whose message could be twisted to reflect the agenda of any social or political or cultural group. Truly cheap material, isn’t it?

Perhaps it’s the poor material of the ever-shifting desires and influences of our society. Why call sin “sin”, when it makes you feel good? Why not compromise with those who hold to false teaching or compromise with the popular worldviews of the day? Why not endorse teaching that contradicts what God’s Word really says and endorse actions that are clearly evil in God’s sight? Why not endorse the murder of unborn babies, the blessing of same-sex unions, and the complete reversal of what God says about men, women, the family, the church, and life itself? Cheap material, isn’t it?

The truth is, these cheap, poor substitutes have been slowly ruining foundations since the fall into sin. When Adam and Eve listened to the Tempter’s lie and doubted what God really said, the rot of unbelief began its way through the line of humanity down to us today. The wisdom of men and the influence of society have caused countless steeples to fall and walls to tumble. Whole church bodies once led and filled with people who stood firm on God’s Word have fallen prey to the slow seeping rot of false teaching and unbelief. Paul warns us of a similar fate. **“Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a “fool” so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.”** Earlier Paul warned those who failed to faithfully confess the truth and caused destruction in God’s church, **“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”** So on what foundation is your church built? Is it a foundation built to last, built on Christ and the faithful confession of him and his Word or is it a foundation that will one day crumble, based on the wisdom and popularity of this passing world? If we are tempted to use those poor, cheap materials, Paul brings us back to where God wants us to be as a church. **“So then, no more boasting about men! ...You are of Christ...”**

By God’s grace, our foundation is still that of Christ crucified. If we grow arrogant, let us confess our sins and receive Christ’s forgiveness and grace. Rather than grow careless, let us ever be diligent in watching out for the poor foundations of false teaching. Let us keep building on this foundation of Christ through the faithful teaching of God’s Word, through faithfully sharing it with those we love, and passing it on to the next generation. By God’s grace, then, on the Last Day, we will finally join together as the one, holy, Christian, and apostolic Church whose “one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord!” Amen.