

“Architecture of our Faith”

1 Cor. 3:1-17

9/24/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

The problem Paul deals with in this part of Corinthians is how they are playing favorites with preachers. Paul had started the church, stayed with them for a year and a half and then moved on to start up other churches in Asia minor. He stayed in touch with the congregation through his co-workers and friends from that church and had heard of their problems.

One of the converts to the new faith expression of Christianity was Apollos, a gifted orator and Old Testament scholar. He was in the Corinth church doing a fine job of nurturing the people but it seems that some were dividing themselves off from others, claiming that they were followers more of Apollos than Paul. There were other factions as well.

Paul considers this behavior to be a result of jealousy and strife and calls it ‘childish,’ – calling them ‘beginners’ in the area of Christian maturity. “You’ve got it all wrong,” Paul was saying, “you’re not supposed to play favorites with ministers because all of us are only servants.” And then Paul gives two metaphors to reinforce his point.

His first illustration is agricultural. Paul says he is like the one who planted the seed back when he started the church. Apollos is the one who waters the plant in the ensuing time but God, Paul is saying, is the one Who causes the growth. Paul next explains his metaphor, ... both the planter and the one who waters the plant are co-workers of equal importance but their work is of less importance when compared to the overall work of God.

I think he could just as well be saying that ministers are the table servers in God’s chain of restaurants. Just as a person may grow accustomed to the manor and style of a certain person waiting on them, the reason they come to a particular restaurant is not because of the server but because of the food and atmosphere. In every church, the spiritual food ultimately comes from God’s Spirit – no matter how it is served up by the worship leader (or the dynamic of our learning from a group of other Christians).

The second metaphor Paul gives is that of architecture. Paul considers himself to be the original

contractor who laid down the foundation. He thinks of Apollos as the one who continues to build on that foundation. Paul introduced them to the foundational plan of the Christian faith and Apollos has lead them in an ongoing growth.

It is always useful to speculate about the real situation prompting the writing of these verses, trying to fill in the detail of what went on then. If we got in a time machine and went back to that church, we would probably be able to see the difference between Paul’s gifts and those of Apollos.

Certainly Paul’s strength was in evangelism (as well as being able to write about and defend his Christian world views in discussions). He was strong in introducing people to the faith and motivating them to become more involved in personal growth. But as Paul may have been strong in motivation and enthusiasm, he may have been weak in areas of administration and tasks called for in the long haul of congregational ministry. You can’t help but wonder this because Paul didn’t stay in one church more than a few years. He clearly preferred to be using his skill sets that lent themselves to starting up churches.

Some clergy people, you know, are warmly charismatic individuals but have great difficulty keeping appointments and keeping track of the priorities. Sometimes their work-style and personality pattern helps people bridge relationships and motivate, but they may be underdeveloped in other areas such as in following-through.

On the other hand, Apollos might have had skills more suited for the long haul. He might have been gifted administratively, interested in longer term planning. Perhaps he was warmer and more personal in his personality than Paul. Where he may have been more gregarious and outgoing, Paul might have been more task-oriented and project-focused.

But Paul has no problem with his colleague’s talents. He is just trying to get those people to stop focusing on particular personalities and direct their attention to the cornerstone of the building of their faith in Christ.

Paul goes on to say that what is built up, in one's faith, has to stand the test of time. Perhaps nowhere else is the test of materials better illustrated than in architecture. It makes a difference in what one uses for one's building materials.¹

Paul's reference to building on wood, hay or stubble was obviously a reference to less durable materials. His point about how the architecture of one's faith is to stand up to the strains of life is made in verses 13 - 15.

This reference to things being revealed by fire has traditionally been used as a proof text (by some) to justify their belief in Purgatory. There are some Christians who believe that after this life, we are tested in a half-way place called Purgatory and once we pass this testing we move on to "heaven." This is why some sincere Christians pray for the dead, hoping that their prayers will move their deceased loved ones more swiftly through Purgatory.

The roots for this thinking are in the oral traditions of the Jewish rabbis. Rabbis Hillel & Shammai said that in the afterlife, good and evil people are brought through a fire – the good ones are believed to make it past the fire.²

In Paul's writing here, he is not saying that people will be passed through fire. Instead, Paul is saying that a person's behavior – especially the work put into building one's Christian world view and attentiveness to one's spiritual needs – will be tested by life's experiences. In short, the integrity of a person's faith is what is tested by time and the demands of life.³

¹ Paul's reference to people building on gold, silver, and precious stones could be a reference to those who orient themselves toward wealth or fame instead of toward the more spiritual matters.

² There is even an interesting rabbinical story on this speculated scenario of testing in the afterlife found in the intertestamental book called 'The Testament of Abraham. The Jewish fable says that God makes Abraham the judge and three angels assist Abe in the judging. One angel, on his right, records sins and the other angel, on his left, holds a set of scales. A third angel holds a fire. The legend claims that if this fire burns the deeds of the person being judged, the individual is taken away to a bitter house of correction. Notice, though, that what is being put to the fire are the person's deeds – not the person.

³ The idea, here, is that a more substantial faith will be more durable in the difficult times. A more flimsy faith that is less

Paul's use of the phrase "being saved but only as through fire" was just a popular saying, like: being saved 'by the skin of their teeth.' His point is that some have constructed a stronger faith than others, but we are all recipients of God's grace. In other words, even though some may be going through life with a flimsy faith, (a religious house of cards)⁴ – their house of cards will fall apart, but they as individuals will still be under God's grace.

You outgrow and eventually abandon what doesn't work for you, but parents shouldn't worry about their children's faith or spirituality. I have to tell this to parents a lot in my job, but this is what I say.

"Whatever religious expression people pursue or not pursue in their youth, ... if it seems less than what they'll need, in your opinion, don't worry. God is with them and there's more to their life than just what you (as a parent) can influence. God is with them and nothing they do can ever change how God feels about them. And they will ultimately get what they need spiritually, emotionally, physically and intellectually – just as you did yourself.

Parents sometimes get this faulty thinking in that they look back at their life, and all the troubles and hardships they experienced and are truly grateful for the people and experiences in which God seemed to be involved to bring them healing and learning. But here is where the thinking gets fouled up. A parent remembers all they've been through and God's part in it but somehow thinks that this won't happen to anyone other than them. Somehow a mother or father acts as if he or she was the last person on earth with whom God ever cared or became involved.

Their faulty thinking, then, causes them to think that since God has given up on everyone else after them, now it's all up to them, the last human in the world that God helped, to control everything else in their child's life so that nothing bad will ever happen to them and they'll never make any bad decisions and have to learn from them. If you're a parent and you believe it is all up to you to play God because God was done loving and intervening with you, I think

centered on the Christ of the Gospels will not endure.

⁴ inadequately depending not on Christ but on some misguided conception of having to be good enough or thinking one is better than others,

you'll find yourself with more than one life to live and you'll certainly fail in your abilities and your faith. Your faith will fail because your faith is only in yourself.

Saying it the way Paul does, God's love for us isn't dependent on how good we are doing with our church attendance or our articulation of our religious philosophy or world view. Everyone, Paul is saying, is a temple in which God's Spirit dwells. Therefore, getting involved in comparing and playing favorites with certain church leaders (or even religious denominations today) quickly becomes shallow and unproductive.

A number of lessons emerge from Paul's creative metaphors about the Christian ministry. When we baptize a person, we promise to give the child the foundation for a Christian faith – sharing with them the good news of the message of Jesus (as well as our own sense of God's presence along our way). The entire church promises the parents that they are going to help them build the primary structural support for their child's spiritual quest in life.

In the early years, our children will be painting, playing with clay and coloring, but what they'll be learning with those materials will be that all of us are God's children, ... that Jesus showed us how to live life under the embrace of a loving God. In the foundation of their spirituality will be the experiential love they see in their household and in their larger family of the church.

Through the years, more substance will be added to the structure of their faith. As children grow, become young adults, experience their adulthood and elder years, God's people, wherever they are) will be present in their lives. This is what the Christian Church is about: a community-built structure of faith which is always building, always repairing, always examining, expanding, reevaluating and repairing again. Through time, all of us have some kind of faith in God that will carry us through the harshness of life.

Secondly, all of us have a foundation of faith of sorts. For some of us it was established when another Christian showed concern for us and demonstrated patience and understanding. This was when we became aware of a sense of our worth, (our own presence) as someone else responded to us because they knew we have worth.

But if our parents have seriously failed in being present in a compassionate, caring and focused way – it will take a little longer for us to get a sense of our own worth. Some of us have to act out throughout our twenties just to get the anger and frustration out (about that physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual neglect). But after the anger, when life 101 takes you by the shoulders and shakes you and forces you to get serious with whatever it is you want to do with your life – it will come. God usually sends some other adult into your life who helps you get clear on your own worth and where God is in all this.

For others, at an earlier point in life, their foundation may have been a carefully studied philosophy of life, cemented together by an organized quest for greater understanding about religion. And for others, they find that their primary foundation for life is a simple trust in Christ that was sparked by a significant emotional experience in a worship setting.

So Paul is suggesting that the closer we pay attention to the life and teachings of Jesus, the less likely it will be that we will find our faith journey on shifting sands of the trends and fads of society. We're able to live with greater depth so that the word "integrity" becomes more descriptive of how you go about making decisions for your life.⁵ Through the years, everything we do to seek a greater understanding of God improves the quality of our lives. The major thing about having a good foundation of faith is that once it is there, it is something upon which we can always build. All of life, then, becomes a dynamic of learning and growth. The longer we live, the more exciting life can become.

Lastly, as we continually try to grow in our understanding of our Christian faith, we often find, I

⁵ The rock that seems to be the most worthy upon which to build is that of the unconditional and unshakable love God has for each of us.

Karl Barth, one of the 20th century's most voluminous writers and theologians, was standing before a gathering of seminary professors from many countries. He was asked: "Dr. Barth, what do you feel is the most important truth about Christianity?" How would you answer that question, . . . what is the most important truth about Christianity? Well the famous Karl Barth responded, with his thick German accent, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." We build our faith on the basic love God has for us through Christ.

think, a growing strength in how we are able to handle the difficulties. Through the years, as we sense God's presence and creativity in our lives, we also come to feel some steadiness amidst the changes and challenges in our lives. As difficulties come, we become more aware of a strength and presence that is holding us – sometimes giving us an unexplainable peace.

We may even find a Presence in our lives that enables us to endure things we never thought possible. Sometimes we will be surprised, in looking back, to see that God must have been present in a compassionate way so that we were able to face that tremendous hardship.

This is certainly not to infer that the older we become and the further we are along in our faith, the more it guarantees that we should be able to handle anything! It is just suggesting that the more we are involved in trying to make our faith and world view more relevant to how we're living, the better off we'll be.

As for my personal faith, I see myself as among those who make it by the skin of their teeth. I'm not much on pain when it comes to health. I'd rather be an alive hypochondriac than a dead stoic. I usually figure that just because doctors say I'm healthy, it doesn't mean they haven't missed something.

And when it comes to trusting God, most of the time I prepare myself for things to work out as bleakly as possible – only to have God grab me by the scruff of the neck and show me how beautiful things turned out in spite of my skepticism. I think that at times, God has sheltered my soul – even though I didn't know enough to come in out of the rain of my lack of faith.

But that's the way it is with God. God kind of sets us on the foundation of Christ's love and causes our faith to grow into different kinds of structures, but structures, nevertheless – sometimes healing the core of who we are from the harshness of life.

Sooner or later, what we come to find, from our faith, is an intellectual, emotional, psychological and sociological framework from within which we live. In other words, we arrive at a world view and an ongoing process of pursuing learning about life, ourselves, others and God. We gradually come to trust the reality of God in our lives, not blindly, but

with a sense that for us, Christianity makes the most sense, ... that it is something (and Someone) of substance on which to base the way we go about our brief stay on this planet. With and beyond that, God somehow has become a reality in our lives – in different ways to different people – despite the great fears of our parents.⁶

But think through the years of your life, if you will, and recall the various architects and builders God may have sent into your experiences. Who was the first person you remember – when you were a kid – who seemed to show you that you mattered and perhaps that God was around in your life? How about someone today, in your life, with whom you perhaps just talk to on the telephone – that special someone who is truly present in your life – someone who makes you feel that they are really there with you when they're there. These special people – all the way through your childhood to your present and into your future – may be indwelled by something special to be special in your life. They have been sent to be with you to help you keep the structure of your life together.

Most of all, Paul reminds you that your very soul, that resides within you at the core of who you are, is embraced by God's loving Spirit. Sometimes we feel like we're inhabiting a very temporary and wind-blown tent and sometimes we feel that we'll be blown away – helpless if one thing or another happens someday. Ultimately, though, we live sheltered by the God of the universe – God of the sparrow – and nothing can ever change that in all eternity. ■



⁶ Usually we have great cause to celebrate the stability that our faith can give us in life. We should be happy that we have some foundation of faith – usually from experiencing something of God's unconditional love – but too often we're we get sidetracked, distracted by the negative in life? We often see our cup as half empty instead of half full.