

Dear Church
1 Corinthians 3:10-23 (focusing on 10-17)

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Many of you will remember that in June of last year we turned on the news to see one of the worst engineering catastrophes in American history: the Surfside condominium building in Miami collapsed, killing 98 people and trapping over 100 more. It was an unspeakable tragedy. Since that time, experts have been investigating all the details surrounding the construction and maintenance of the property, trying to figure out what caused the calamity. The evidence points to the leading cause as substandard construction. There wasn't enough concrete structural support or reinforced steel. Then excess water penetration led to corrosion, and eventually the compromised support led to the collapse and the tragic loss of life.

This story reminds us of the urgency and priority of constructing a building with integrity. In our passage today, Paul uses a building metaphor to remind us of the urgency and priority of building the church with integrity. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 3. This passage is about building—not building a home or a library or an office complex or a high rise, but building a church. And not the bricks and mortar of a church, not a physical building where we gather, but building the community of committed disciples who gather to worship God the Father, in the name of God the Son, through the power of God the Spirit. The Corinthian church was a community that was being constructed like a building, and Paul wanted to make sure it was being built right. We, as a church family, are a community that is being constructed like a building, and we need to do everything in our power to make sure our building is being built right.

Let's dive in to see what God's word has to say.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple. (1 Corinthians 3:10-17)

In this passage Paul teaches us five truths about the church. We'll talk about each one.

(1) The church is established on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Paul says in 3:10-13

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is.

Paul is saying when he arrived in Corinth and hoped to see a local church take shape, as a wise builder he didn't start hammering nails and installing plumbing; he began by laying a foundation. And what is the foundation of the church? What is the starting place of faith? Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one and only foundation for the church. The church is not built on a pastor, no matter how talented. The church is not

built on a ministry model, no matter how effective. The church is not built on a system, a doctrine, or a strategy. The foundation for every church is Jesus Christ. When Paul arrived in Corinth, Jesus was his entire focus. Just as Jesus was the foundation for the church in Corinth, Jesus is the foundation for The Creek. When our church was constructed we put this stone at the entrance to our building (see online sermon to view photo). As you walk around our church, you see our vision in several different places. We exist “To connect People to Jesus.” The same as for Paul, Jesus is the foundation of everything we do.

I have a good friend who started building a house last year. Right after things had gotten underway, he was at the site looking around with a friend who has some construction experience, and his friend said, “I think your footers are off.” Footers are the foundation of a house. My friend went to his builder, his builder went back to the drawings—it turned out, the footers were off. Because the foundation was wrong, they couldn’t build the house. They had to jackhammer all the concrete, remove the debris, and start all over. If the foundation isn’t right, you can’t build a house. That is why we make sure, as a church, from the sermons we preach, to the songs we sing, to receiving communion on a weekly basis, to the lessons we teach in children’s ministry, to local missions, global mission, Rooted, life groups—everything we do is about one thing: connecting people to Jesus.

So Jesus is the foundation, but look at what Paul says next:

(2) The church is built by the ministry of different leaders.

We know Jesus said in Matthew 16 that he is the one who will build the church, but look at that text again:

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is.

Paul says that he laid a foundation church in Corinth by preaching about Jesus and then someone else built on it. When Paul eventually left to continue mission work elsewhere, another pastor stepped in to continue the Christ-centered work in the church and in that city. Paul got the work started, someone else continued it. There is no way to avoid it: a church will be shaped by the quality of the leaders.

How many of you have been to Washington, D.C.? Keren and I were there a few years ago to lay her grandfather’s remains at Arlington National Cemetery. It was such a moving experience. Afterwards we spent time touring the historic buildings. I was struck by the Washington Monument. It’s 555 feet tall. When it was completed, it was the tallest structure in the world. I had seen it in pictures hundreds of times, but I had never taken note from the pictures that there are two different colors to the Washington Monument—150 feet up the color shifts. That’s because the construction of the monument was halted for 23 years from 1854 to 1877 due to lack of resources. When it started again, it was under a different project manager who sourced stone from a different quarry. So although the original design was completed, it looks a little bit different. The same is true with leaders in a church. We have a design or blueprint that is given to us by Jesus, but for each leader, depending on their culture, their generation, and their experiences, based upon the unique passions and gifts God has given them, their ministry looks a little bit different.

It’s an unbelievable responsibility to build up the church, and that leads to the next point.

(3) The church needs to be built with wisdom.

Look at the passage again. Paul calls himself a wise builder. The Greek (“sophia architecton”—wise architect, skilled craftsman, expert builder). He says anyone else who comes and builds the church must build with care, then he spells out what building with care looks like. He says you can build with gold, silver and costly stones, or you can build with wood, hay or straw. Pastors, elders, and leaders in the church have a choice: we can build up the body of Christ with integrity, humility, and purity, relying on the power of the Spirit to help grow people to be mature disciples of Jesus Christ, or we can do the work of ministry in a cheap, haphazard, get-it-done-fast kind of way. Doing ministry the right way is costly on the front end but rewarding on the back end. Doing ministry the wrong way seems rewarding on the front end, but is unbelievably costly on the back end.

That friend I mentioned earlier, who had to have his foundation poured again—it was really interesting. I was talking with him early on about which builder he was going to choose. It was between two guys, one of whom was more expensive and a little more direct and abrupt in his communication. The other was with a guy who was cheaper and a little more flattering in his communication, easier to talk to. He went with the cheaper builder who was easier to talk to. Not only did he have to redo the entire foundation, there were about a dozen major things done wrong on the house in the initial stages, so my friend had to fire the builder, personally absorb a six-figure loss, and then hire the more expensive guy to finish the project. I watched that entire process unfold over two years and I learned a very valuable lesson: when you are building a house, you don’t go for cheap and easy and flattering, you don’t go with the easiest person to talk to. You do it the right way, even if it comes at a higher cost. The same is true when it comes to building up a church.

Often when I hear people talk about choosing a church, they talk about convenience and preference-based things: how close it is to their house, how much they enjoy the music style, if there are a lot of “fun” activities. Those things may all be worthy of taking into consideration, but that is not the substance of a church. That’s the paint color on the wall. Those are the decorations and furniture in the house. You need to make sure the house is built with a substance that will last. After making sure the foundation is clearly Jesus Christ you have to ensure that the teaching is consistently based on the Word of God, that people are actually renouncing sin and idols and worldly patterns of living and maturing into the image of Jesus, that relationships aren’t just based on convenience and affinity but on sacrificial love, that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is evident in the lives of the leaders and their decisions and interactions. That’s the substance of a church. Don’t look for convenience; look for character and Christ-likeness.

Of course, this has huge implications for me as the senior pastor, and it has huge implications for our elders and our staff. But I want you to realize, this has huge implications for every person who calls this their church home, for every person who is a partner at The Creek and is engaged in the ministry work to which God has called us. The elders and staff aren’t the only ones responsible for building up the church. We are more like foremen and team leaders who are training, equipping and deploying all the construction workers. You are the ones with hammers and drills in your hands. What does it mean for you to build the church with care? It’s about the discipleship that happens when you meet in your life groups, it’s about the conversations adult leaders have with the third graders in their class rooms, it’s about the dozens of adults who took a week of vacation to travel with our middle and high school students for five days at summer camp, it’s about inviting your friends to church, it’s about greeting those who are new, and not just saying hi, but inviting them out to lunch or over to your house to get to know their story, it’s about giving generously, it’s about refusing to gossip and tear people down—everything we do as members of this church plays a role, in some form or fashion, in constructing this church. God’s word calls us to build with care, to build with intentionality, to be willing to pay a high price to see this church become all that God wants it to be. We all have a serious ownership stake in this! That’s important to take note of, because look at what Paul says next.

(4) The church will be evaluated on the day of judgment.

The Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3:13-15)

When Paul says the Day will bring it to light, he is not just talking about any day, it's a capital D. He's talking about judgment day. When Jesus returns, everything we ever did will be evaluated. If our ministry was inadequate, if we were selfish or self-serving or superficial, if we operated with our own resources rather than the power of God, if we promoted our preferences rather than God's agenda, our personalities rather than the fruit of the Spirit, then as if fire swept through a dry hay field, we will have nothing left to show for ourselves. But if we have served selflessly, if we have loved consistently, if we have lived with holiness, if we have shared our faith, if we have given the best of our resources to point people to Jesus, then when we stand before Jesus, he will look at everything that stood the test of judgment and give us a reward.

Sometimes we fail to remember that a real evaluation is coming. I have a friend who has a very disengaged boss. This boss tells him, at the end of every year, to write his own review. Wouldn't that be nice? How did you do this year? You know, I think I did really well! Any areas for improvement? Not that I can think of! Recommend for a raise? Absolutely! If you have a lazy boss, that might be how your annual evaluation goes. But that's not how it's going to be on judgment day. We don't get to evaluate ourselves based on how we think we did. God is going to evaluate us, and it's going to be based upon how faithfully we built his church. Did we tell people about Jesus, did we help people to grow in their walk with Jesus, did we make disciples of Jesus Christ. If you live in California, you construct buildings differently because you know you live on the San Andreas fault and there are earthquakes happening on a regular basis. If you know an earthquake is coming, you build differently. We know that everything we do is going to be judged, so we need to build differently!

I remember recently talking to a married couple who was mentoring a younger couple who were engaged to be married. The married couple told me that they had lots of intense discussions with them about physical purity before marriage, about their finances and always putting a tithe as the first in their budget, about family baggage and conflict resolution—you name it. I commended them for the way they invested into that young couple, and I'll never forget the response. The husband said, "We know one day we will stand before God and give an account for our investment in their lives, so we'd rather have the hard conversations today and an easy conversation with God later rather than the easy conversations today and a really hard conversation with God later. When we remember that we will stand before God, it changes how we invest our time, energy and effort.

Many of you will remember roughly three years ago when the world watched with bated breath as the Notre Dame cathedral caught fire. One of the most iconic churches in the world was up in flames. Over 400 firefighters engaged in efforts to suppress the fire. Drones and robots were used. They pumped water from the Seine. Though the spire fell and some artwork was lost, the majority of the building was spared, in large part because the vaulted ceiling was made with stone. The wood, which was 13th century oak, by the way, burned up. But the stone remained. As a church we have to know, the Bible is warning us, sooner or later, everything we do as a church is going to have to stand the test of fire. We have to build in such a way that what we build endures.

The reason all of this is so important is because of what Paul tells us in our next point.

(5) The church is the sacred dwelling place of God.

We see this in verses 16 and 17: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.”

This was a profound statement for Paul to write. In his day, all the Jewish people believed that the temple in Jerusalem was the dwelling place of God. For nearly 1,000 years, this is where people gathered for worship, this is where sacrifices were made, this is where the holy of holies was located. If you asked any Jew in Paul’s day where they could go to find the presence of God, they would say the temple. This is the only answer they would give. But Paul said, “Nope. That may have been the case long ago, but it is so no longer. That’s not where God’s Spirit resides. He resides in your midst. He has made the church his home.” Here’s the reason highlighted in this passage: be sure not to destroy God’s home. One might ask, “How could you go about destroying the church? If the church isn’t a building but a people, how could you destroy a church?” How about a pastor having an affair, causing irreparable damage in multiple people’s lives, as well as tarnishing the reputation of the church in the community? How about a leader in the church abusing a child, causing unspeakable harm to that child and their family, and also eroding the trust of the church in the community? How about a disgruntled member of the church getting on social media and venting their frustration with the church for everyone on the internet to see? That’s not how to treat the sacred dwelling place of God!

God loves the church. God is committed to the church. God sent his Son to die to save the church. The Bible tells us, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25) and that God “bought (the church) with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). God views his church as sacred and holy and he wants us to value, honor, and respect the church as sacred and holy. Our goal and desire is to see this church become God’s dream home!

I mentioned a moment ago about Notre Dame burning. Since the fire took place, over 1 billion dollars has been pledged to help restore that church to its original splendor. The government isn’t funding it. People are. Some gave a few dollars, some gave a few hundred, some gave a few thousand, several have given tens of millions. They all pledged to give what they could, even if it took 20-40 years, to see the church rebuilt. If people would give so much to see a physical building restored and beautified, how much more committed should we be, how much more should we be willing to give to see the church God has called us to be a part of restored and beautified. It will come at a high price, it will take time and talent and treasure, it will take prayer and labor in the spiritual realms, it will take decades of effort. But if it honors God, draws people into his presence, points people to faith in Jesus Christ, and leads to an eternal reward, it will be worth it a million times over! Think back with me to the Surfside condominium building. We don’t want the church we are a part of to last a few decades and then fall apart. We want to be a part of something that can stand for centuries for the glory of God as we connect people to Jesus in our community. We get to decide, based on how we build and serve and love this church, what the end result will be.