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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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Building a Future Together with God

1 Corinthians 3:9c-23

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What do people look for when they choose a church?

I got into a conversation with my hairdresser last week. The conversation was about church. When she found out I was a pastor, her question to me was: “does your church do a lot of singing?” I really didn’t know what to say. After talking a bit, she explained what she meant. You see, for a while she had been attending another Lutheran church. What she liked most about this church was that it had a band and did a lot of singing. This is what she was interested in most.

After talking a bit, I realized this wasn’t a conversation about style of music or worship. I soon realized this was much more fundamental. A more important question had come up; I asked her: “do you believe the Bible is God’s Word?” – she couldn’t say for sure. Maybe – she used to always think so. But now she’s not sure. She wants to say yes, but only because she’s afraid of what will happen if she says no. She says, “I’m afraid that if don’t follow the rules, God will be mad at me.”

This conversation was no longer about worship style or choice of music. It had become much more fundamental. This was a question of foundation. Upon what foundation is our beliefs and practice built? Upon what foundation are we saved?

What do people look for when they choose a church? If we are not standing on the same foundation, it is very difficult to discuss how to build a future together. God is building a future with us. And what He is first concerned about most is to lay the proper foundation. This conversation is about building a future – it is about building a future with God that will endure the test and testing of time.

We turn to the last in our series of texts from 1 Corinthians. Paul is here rounding out his argument; he has been developing the idea that the foolish message of the cross has united the Corinthian congregation together in fellowship with each other and with God Spirit –

1 Corinthians 3:9c–23

9 *You are God's building.*

10 *According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.*

11 *For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

12 *Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,*

13 *each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.*

14 *If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward.*

15 *If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*

16 *Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*

17 *If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.*

18 *Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.*

19 *For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness";*

20 *and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."*

21 *Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours:*

22 *whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours.*

23 *And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

We pray: Oh Holy God, through Your Spirit, dwell among us in the preaching of Your Word, establishing the right foundation, building us up with lasting materials, that You might dwell with us forever. Amen.

The Splendor of Solomon's Temple

King Solomon is perhaps best known for the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. 1 Kings 5-7 records this massive project. Imagine seeing the beauty of it. Imagine seeing the cedar trees shipped in from Tyre being cut for paneling and overlaid with gold so that "not one stone could be seen" (6:18). You see the inside – overlaid with refined gold – the floor, the altar, the doors; it glimmers as the light from the golden lamps flickers. They used the finest quality craftsmanship; they spared no cost. The sight must have been breathtakingly beautiful.

It was so glorious, in fact, that it became a source of superstition. By the time of Jesus, Jews looked to the Temple not for the glory which dwelt within it – namely, the LORD

and His promises – but they looked to the Temple as a symbol of their own outward glory. Worship had become merely outward – As Jesus said, “they draw near with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me.” Temple worship had been emptied of its true Glory.

Jesus comes to the religious leaders with a warning:

Matthew 23:16–17 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?”

The Temple had become nothing more than an outward thing. It was something to be relied upon not because of the glory which dwelt within it, but because of the glory which was found on the outside – the cost, the quality, the outward membership. And such outward glory, such outward church membership will never last; such outward works will never endure the testing of time. When building a future together with God, we need a foundation and materials that will last.

Resting on the wrong foundation, resting on their own works, their future was doomed. God Himself had come to dwell among them. He had come, not just in a cloud, but in human flesh. The true foundation for a future together with God had appeared in there, in the Temple, in the person of Jesus Christ. And they were so caught up in outward things – earthly satisfactions, earthly hope – that they did not recognize what was dwelling right among them – and they crucified Him.

The beauty of Solomon’s temple was only outward. Our earthly accomplishments cannot create, manipulate, or consecrate God’s presence. God cannot be manipulated by our works, our confession, or our worship. He doesn’t need A future together with God, can be built on nothing else than His works, His promises, and His holy gifts in Christ Jesus.

As we face dilemmas in our life; sins that plague us; troubles that don’t go away, what is our response? Do we often think the answer to this or that dilemma in our life is simply to “toughen up,” to “do the right thing,” to fix it, or at least make it look better. The real danger is out there among the Jews so long ago; the danger is right here, in us and among us. There is a danger right here; and the danger is this: that we think a future together with God is founded upon rules or behavior; upon my being strong enough; saying the right thing or doing the right thing to fix the problem; or upon some sort of superstition, as if this or that sign in my life will reveal the LORD’s will for my life.

We might think that a future together with God is about getting rid of those things which look ugly and keeping those things which are most beautiful – we adorn ourselves with gold and glitter and simply cover up the defilement that is in each of us. We rely on our church membership – we swear by titles like orthodox, Lutheran, CLC, and conservative; yet all along our hearts grow farther and farther from God; we push away the very people we should be reaching out to save; we ignore the other idols that are taking up refuge among us – bitterness, resentment, anger, gossip, rudeness, and those hidden sins we would rather not think about. And miss the fact that God is right among us, dwelling here, even in the flesh.

But God works His grace. He determines to build a new future for His people; to build a new Temple, ever more glorious, ever more lasting. And He would use His own Son as the sure foundation. Jesus prophesies concerning His own death in John 2, saying to the Jews – *John 2:19 “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”* He was talking, about a new glory and a new Temple. He was talking about the temple of His body; His body – holy, blameless; the Temple in which God Himself dwelt. As Paul writes in Colossians, “In Him dwells all the fullness of the God head bodily.” His body - that holy place - would become the place of atonement. He would be defiled by sin, his temple destroyed by our sins; On the cross, Jesus would take within Himself the idolatry of the world. He would take your sins and mine to that place of sacrifice. And there in a grave outside Jerusalem lay the holy body of God’s own Son – dead.

But there in that grave of Jesus, God would visit His people. There in that grave, God would raise up a New Temple; He would create a place of holiness in which God’s people could dwell, He would raise up Jesus, His own Son.

So Amos prophesied:

Amos 9:11 “On that day I will raise up The tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, And repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, And rebuild it as in the days of old;

You are that Temple. Here, where we gather in Christ’s name, God has raised up a new dwelling place for Himself and He has founded it upon the death and resurrection of His Son. *Psalms 118:22 The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

And so Paul writes,

9 You are God’s building. 10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is

Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. 16 Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

As a wise master builder, Paul laid a foundation that will stand the testing of time – the testing of time that you face even now in your Christian life. And we build on that foundation – the foundation of grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. We are that Temple. Together with God, we are being built up, a holy habitation for God's Spirit.

The foundation for the future must be solidly built upon Christ. No other foundation can anyone lay. However, we recognize that not all churches teach or practice the faith in the same way. We also recognize that even though we don't worship or practice fellowship together with other synods and Christian denominations – that does not mean there are not believers in those congregations. If pastors and teachers continue to preach Christ and Him crucified, if the central creed of the Christian faith is still confessed – then salvation will endure, despite the false teaching or faulty materials being used. We confess this in our Statement of Faith and Purpose:

“We joyfully acknowledge that the Lord knows His elect children even though some are members of false-teaching churches. However, by their membership they are identifying with and promoting error by which the salvation of souls is threatened. We pray that all who believe in the Lord Jesus may be preserved in this faith to their end and finally receive, by His merits and mercy, the crown of eternal life” (St. of F. and P., Art. VI. p.16).

This is what we acknowledge – churches can adopt errors that do not agree with God's word and yet still stand on the same foundation of Christ as we do. That foundation of Christ preserves the fellowship of believers and so those who stand on the foundation of Christ and His grace alone will be saved.

But, Paul warns, let each take heed. So easily it creeps in. So easily an idol invades the place of God's dwelling. The context is communal, congregational – Paul addresses the future of the congregation and the future of God's people. “You are God's building ... the Spirit of God dwells among you.” Any sin or false teaching left unaddressed, ignored, or promoted is an idol in God's Temple. It defiles His holiness. And eventually, if left unaddressed, if not repented of, will destroy the foundation of Christ

and rob a believer of saving faith. Paul warns that any false teaching or sin that is not dealt with threatens the whole community of believers – in every denomination, in every place. It threatens our future together with God.

16 Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells [among] you? 17 If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

What was it that made Solomon's Temple holy? What set it apart from all other temples and monuments of its day? Was it the gold, the craftsmanship, the cost, the quality? What made this temple holy?

We read in chapter 7 of 1 Kings, how the project had been completed, and there was just one thing left to do. The priests approach, carrying with them the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant contained God's ten commandments and was a symbol of the covenant God had made with His people at Sinai. The most precious ark was the mark of the testimony that God had made with them, a mark of God's presence among them – His promises to go with them, to protect them, and to bring forth a Savior from their descendants.

Four priests approach those golden doors, surrounded by the congregation of elders and the heads of all the tribes. Sheep and oxen are being sacrificed; so many so that it could not be numbered. This was a day of feast for all the people. They sing psalms of praise as the priests approach with the testimony of the LORD – there into the most holy place, they went and placed the ark, under the wings of the cherubim.

As priests came out of the holy place, a cloud fills the house of the Lord. The presence of God had appeared, so bright and glorious that the priests had to stop ministering and leave the Temple. This is what it meant for the Temple to be called holy – not because of its quality or cost or craftsmanship, but because of what was to be found within it; because the Lord, the God of the covenant, was present within its walls; this Temple was glorious, because here was where the covenant of God was present – the commandments and promises were here; the hope and future of the world; the promise of a Christ, the Savior of all mankind was dwelling in this place of worship – truly this was a holy place; for here was where the LORD God of Israel had made Himself known. Here was where the sacrifices were given, indicating the once for all sacrifice of God's Son. Here, the blood of the the sacrifice was poured out and God forgave the people's sins.

This is what concerned God – that the people recognize His holiness, that they fear Him, and that they trust in His mercy.

And so, for that reason, we rest our hope on the commands and promises of God. This is a future founded – not in the glitter and glory of my works or craftsmanship, but is a future built upon Christ and God’s dwelling among us in His word. This is to build with lasting materials – God’s covenant, His presence, His promises. This is true Glory – where God draws us into His holiness, where the blood of His Son cleanses us from all sin, where His Word directs our steps and keeps us firmly built upon something that will last.

So my hairdresser asks: does your church do a lot of singing? As the conversation went on, I learned a little more about her. She explained more about her background. When she was young, she attended a Catholic grammar school. Later in life she became a Mormon, and for many years, was practicing the Mormon religion.

It was no wonder she looked at the Bible as nothing but God’s rules. It was no wonder she was confused about whether the Bible was really God’s Word or not. The Mormon religion is all about outward works, and fails to recognize worship in terms of God’s gracious presence among us. It was no wonder she was longing for something more uplifting, for an upbeat song service, for a church with a band. She had no idea about what it means for Christ to dwell among us in Word and Sacrament, to draw near God’s holiness and receive the cleansing sacrifice of Christ’s blood, to have faith based solely on the proclamation of the gospel.

I tried and probably failed to explain that the way to know the Bible is God’s word for this reason: it proclaims the resurrection. It reveals the foundation for God’s salvation – faith in Christ alone and His work alone. Until we established that common foundation, there was little to I could do to to have a conversation about worship style.

And so we are brought back to the foundation of it all – in every conversation, in our work together as a fellowship, we are building a future with God, and this future will last, for it is built upon the foundation of Christ alone.

*Christ is made the sure foundation
Christ, our head and cornerstone,
Chosen of the Lord and precious,
Binding all the Church in one,
Holy Zion’s help forever,
And our confidence alone.*

*To this temple, where we call you,
Come, O Lord of hosts, an stay;
Come with all your loving-kindness
Hear You people as they pray.
And Your fullest benediction
Speak within these walls today.*

Amen.