

Build on the right foundation

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[0 : 0 0] And if you could just keep your Bibles open to 1 Corinthians chapter 3. Again, there's also a sermon outline. I think it's accessible on the Facebook link somewhere or on the website if you haven't received it already, and that could help you to follow along.

Let's pray again and ask God for his help. Father, as we come again today, we just pray, Lord, that you would be using your word to do your work.

Please accomplish your purposes. Please give us the right mindset and help us to put what you want us to put into practice. So be at work in our hearts, open our ears, open our hearts, that you might build us into the kind of church that you want us to be.

In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. On June 3, 1979, the Kemper Arena in Kansas City hosted the Convention of America's Top Architects.

When it opened a few years earlier, these same architects had honoured the arena with an award, recognising it as one of the finest structures of the nation. Indeed, it had even hosted the Republican Party's National Convention.

[1 : 0 9] But that very night, tragedy struck. Several inches of rain poured down in less than an hour, and before you know it, the roof had collapsed. It was so violent that the pressure from the falling roof blew out some of the walls.

Investigations later revealed that the innovative roof design had insufficient drainage, causing excessive ponding, which the roof's hangar boats could not bear.

Thankfully, no one was hurt, with one employee on site escaping just in time. But it appeared that form had been prioritised over function, style over substance.

But let me tell you about another building, the Transamerica Pyramid, which is in San Francisco. This building is 49 storeys tall, and in 1989, it endured an earthquake that was about 7 on the Richter scale.

When the earthquake struck, the top story of the structure swayed from side to side for just over a minute. But amazingly, the whole building emerged undamaged, with no serious injuries reported on site.

[2 : 2 0] Now, I am no engineer, but I'm told that this is due to a 52-foot-deep steel and concrete foundation that's designed to deal and absorb such movements.

Thankfully, form and function, style and substance all work together to ensure that it survives. Now, when the storm hits and the earthquake strikes, which structure would you rather be in?

The answer is obvious, isn't it? You would want to be in the building that will last. You would want to be in the building that can stand the test of time. And that's where Poe wants us to be.

Except the building Poe has in mind isn't an arena or a pyramid. Look at the end of verse 9. You are God's field, God's building.

In Poe's mind, Christians are the building. And so what he really wants is for us to be a building that lasts. And if we are meant to be God's building, then naturally, Poe is concerned that we be constructed the right way.

[3 : 31] And so the natural follow-up question would be, how can we build a church that will last? How can we build God's people in God's way? The Corinthian Christians thought they knew the answer.

All around them, they saw charismatic speakers captivating their audiences with amazing storytelling and appealing speeches. It almost didn't matter what they said, as long as they could speak well.

It was the form, the style, the outward appearance that made all the difference. And so the Corinthian Christians thought, well, we've got to build the church the same way.

This is the secret of church growth. Make sure we've got the best-looking and eloquent guys who are really spiritual, who will put on a spectacle.

And even in Kuching today, that can be the temptation too, can't it? If we can just find the guy who can preach like the next Philip Mandofa, or sing like the next Juita Suito, well, we've got it sorted.

[4 : 35] And if we already have such people in our midst, well, more power to us. God is really going to unleash his blessing. But this week and next week, Paul is going to say, well, don't get ahead of yourselves just yet.

Don't get puffed up. Sure, it sounds like wisdom that speakers who can draw in the numbers and mobilize the members will guarantee a church's growth.

But hang on a minute. Haven't I just spent the last two chapters stressing how God's wisdom is different to worldly wisdom? So don't be surprised if God's way of building the church is different as well.

And so this morning, that's what we'll be exploring. We'll be thinking about how God wants us to build his church in his way. And God says there are five steps we must take.

Step number one, don't remain as an infant. Don't remain as an infant. In verses 1 to 4, Paul now gets personal. Notice how direct he is.

[5 : 46] I could not address you. I gave you milk. You are still not ready. Are you not acting like mere humans? The apostle is getting blunt.

Corinthians, I'm talking about you, he says. Not people out there. Why? Because there's a serious problem.

And like a good doctor, he wants to bring it out into the open. And what is that problem? It's right there in verse 3. You are still worldly.

But what does he mean by that exactly? Well, verse 1 tells us. Basically, they're behaving like infants. They're like little toddlers. As Christians, they have the spirit.

But they certainly don't act like they do. Now, it's easy to read this and imagine that Paul is speaking in a patronizing tone. But although there's clearly exasperation, he's not calling them names for no good reason.

[6 : 50] You see, he's got evidence. Here's the first incriminating evidence. Verse 2. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it.

Indeed, you are still not ready. Now, at the moment, as you know, we've got a lot of new mothers in our church. And I'm sure they can tell you plenty of stories about trying to get their babies ready for that day when they can take solids.

Now, some babies are pretty easy. You know, they pick up that tiny piece of banana. You encourage them to give it a lick. And then in it goes. But more often than not, you have to bear for a while as they wrinkle their nose.

They shake their head. And then they show off their skill in how far they can spit out your finely chopped chicken. Sometimes you wonder how their aim can be so good since it always ends up in the most inconvenient places.

And you know, somehow that mix that you spend so much time blending always seems to end up on every part of the baby's face except inside the mouth.

[8 : 01] And Paul says to the Corinthians, Well, I noticed the same thing when I tried to give you solid Bible teaching. You've heard the gospel.

You've sung I Have Decided and you believe. That's great. But when I tried to give you more than just a simple message and some simple songs, you wrinkle your nose.

You shake your head. You spit it out. You say it's too intellectual or unnecessary or boring and powerless. Well, you need God's word.

Well, you need God's word in all its fullness. To challenge you to think. To cause you to examine your lives. To help you make wise and godly decisions.

And above all, to know and worship our living God more and more. But you spit out what you need to grow.

[8 : 59] Now, to be clear. In saying that the Corinthians need to move from milk to meat, Paul is not saying that they need to move on from the cross to something more sophisticated.

That wouldn't make sense in light of the previous two chapters. Rather, he's saying that just as you never leave behind the ABCs that you first learn as a toddler, but you do build upon those ABCs to grow in your language fluency.

And so we never ever leave behind the gospel, but we build upon it to grow in gospel fluency. We don't move on from the cross, but we progressively learn to see our world and live our whole lives in light of the cross.

We are called to be gospel-centered people, but not gospel-only people. So we should learn how to deal with conflict or parent our kids or persevere when we're sick in the way Jesus wants us to.

And that requires the full counsel of God. But that's not what you've been doing, says Paul. How do I know? Because here's the second incriminating evidence.

[10 : 26] You are still fighting and quarreling. Look at verses 3 and 4. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?

Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not mere human beings? If you had really understood the cross, Paul says, then you would realize that the cross is all about humility and service, and you would live accordingly.

Instead, although you know the cross, you haven't yet figured out how the cross impacts your relationships. Since you're all more interested in whose hero is better, and whose status is bigger, you're still on milk.

And so here's the irony. You know, the Corinthians were fighting amongst themselves, precisely because one group thought they were more mature than the other.

They're fighting over who is the most mature. But their insistence on proving that they were the most mature was actually a sign of their very immaturity.

[11 : 38] They're like little kids fighting over whose toy is more shiny. They are mere infants. Now remember, the problem isn't being an infant in itself.

After all, every Christian was once an infant, both physically and spiritually. The problem is remaining at that stage.

The problem is when we don't long to grow up. The problem is when we don't long for solid Bible teaching, and we don't aspire to serious Bible living.

And what's worse than that is if we remain at this stage while insisting we are mature. Just imagine your three-year-old insisting that he can drive your Hilux or do your groceries.

Now we laugh, but if he really got into the driver's seat and turned on the ignition, we won't be laughing anymore, would we?

[12 : 44] We know the consequences. Well, that's where the Corinthians were at. And if you have a whole church filled with Corinthians, well, we will be in trouble with you because you won't have a building that can withstand storms and earthquakes.

And so the question we need to be asking ourselves is, are we stubbornly choosing to remain as infants? Are we teachable? Are we ready to grow?

Not just in knowing the scriptures, but in actually living it out. You see, maturity isn't simply about gaining more Bible knowledge, but living out the knowledge we have.

A few months ago, I was in a small group in which a number of people were sharing how hard it is to forgive. They know what the Bible says, they just find it hard to follow.

And they are right. It's tough. But I do truly believe that they want to live in light of the cross, in light of the forgiveness that Jesus has won.

[13 : 56] And I know they find it hard in their respective situations, but I believe they are presently committed to following God. And so they're willing to wrestle with the scriptures and to seek to forgive the other party we are challenging as that is.

And you know what? As they do so, they are growing up. They won't be missing out. Rather, they will enjoy firsthand the experience of God working in them and maturing them.

They'll be seeing themselves built into a building that will last. Now at this point, the Corinthians weren't totally convinced.

Isn't leadership influence, they might say? And so aren't leaders still important? And isn't it the case that we still need the best, the most eloquent leaders we can get if we want the church to be built up?

Well, Paul says, you've got it partially, right? Leaders are important, but not in the way you think. And so that takes us to step number two.

[15 : 08] Have an appropriate view of God's servants. Have an appropriate view of God's servants. I'm currently reading a novel called Americana. And there's a scene where the main character, a Nigerian, is working as a babysitter for her rich employer.

And one day, the doorbell rings and the carpet cleaner is there. And he defers to her automatically, if grudgingly. Why? Because he has mistaken the babysitter for the owner.

And that's what the Corinthians were doing. They saw Apollos. They saw Paul. And they thought Paul and Apollos were the owners. They are the big boys, the powerful, the superstars.

But Paul says, you've got it all wrong. What are we really? Look at verse 5. Only servants.

Babysitters. And when Paul says servants, he doesn't mean servants like Alfred the butler is a servant to Batman. You know where, although Alfred is technically a butler, he's also one of Batman's closest advisors and counselors.

[16 : 22] But as the prophet Isaiah once said, who has given counsel to the Lord? And to make that clear, Paul now compares himself and Apollos to farmhands.

He plants Apollos' waters. But guess what? Are they the reason the plants sprout up? Do they control the environment which enables a seed to germinate?

Is it because of their incredible skills and abilities that water and light are captured and converted into energy and oxygen? The answer, of course, is no.

They're the servants, the farmhands. But God is the owner and more than that, he's the life giver. He alone makes things grow.

And if that's true, then verse 7 is also true. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything but the only God who makes things grow.

[17 : 27] And so Paul says, don't be too quick to think that our talents, our capabilities, our clever strategies are what will make God's building strong and lasting.

Don't get puffed up too quickly. I remember Dr. Gary Miller, the speaker of last year's Clang Valley Bible Conference, sharing his own experience of realizing this.

For a long time, Dr. Miller served as a pastor of a church in Ireland. And when he accepted the call to become the principal of Queensland Theological College, he secretly began to think, hmm, I wonder how the church would do without me.

Would they cope? Maybe they'll struggle. But when he came back to visit them sometime later on, he saw that the church was not only coping, but had even grown, at least numerically, under their new pastor.

And he laughed at himself and said, you know, how foolish I am. You see, Dr. Miller is an excellent preacher, a good strategist, and has impeccable academic credentials, a PhD in Old Testament from Oxford.

[18 : 38] There's a reason he was invited to be a Bible college principal. And his successor isn't quite so distinguished. But in God's hands, that matters little.

For it is God who gives the growth. It is God who assigns the tasks. And God who decides the timing. Sometimes we can fall into the trap of thinking that, oh yes, God saves us.

But after that, it's all up to us to build everything else up. And if we believe that, even if subconsciously, we'll end up looking to the world for inspiration.

But here's the true secret of church growth. Only God can do it. And if we look to someone or something else other than God to grow us or build us, we dishonor him.

But that doesn't mean that people like Paul and Apollos have no role to play. Although God alone gives the growth, he usually works through leaders.

[19 : 48] How did the Corinthians come to believe after all? The answer again is in verse 5. Through his servants. And so the Corinthians are right in one sense.

Leaders are important. That's why we have to be careful in selecting our leaders. In fact, they are key. In verse 9, a distinction is made between people like Paul and Apollos and the rest of the church.

They are co-workers in God's service while the church is God's field and building. Now, we know from other places in the Bible that all Christians are to serve and to build each other up.

Think of Ephesians 4, verse 16, for instance. But the Bible makes clear that leaders also do have a set-apart role as ministers of the word.

And it is through their labor, a word used in verse 8, of such people that God harvests the crops. And as co-workers, they have one purpose.

[20 : 55] They are there to serve God. After all, God's the boss. He is the owner and they are working in his field. But since they are one, they need each other.

The planter must plant and the waterer must water. Otherwise, the crops cannot live. They are not competitors, but fellow laborers who belong to God.

Their reward is with him. And if so, then it's silly, isn't it, for the Corinthians to be fighting over whether having Paul or Apollos or Peter is better for church growth and church health.

They're all on the same team. Now, the Corinthians should definitely be saying thank you to them for their specific roles, but they shouldn't elevate them.

They shouldn't care about who is first or whose church is biggest. And so, as I've been pondering on 3 verse 5 to 9 over this past week, I'm thankful that God has brought Paul Ling back to Keqing over the past year and that we've had a chance to work together, even as he gets ready to church plant in the future.

[22 : 13] Now, we both believe that gospel-centered, word-driven churches are essential, and it would be all too easy for me to view Paul as a competitor who is eating into my market share.

But 1 Corinthians 3 reminds us that the kingdom of God is bigger than KEC, and that Keqing would definitely be better off if we have more churches that resolve to know nothing but Christ crucified.

And that's the kind of view God wants us to have. God alone gives the growth, and he usually does so through his servants. And so when we spot such servants, we should welcome and encourage them.

But his servants must make sure that they are building the right way. And so that takes us to step number three. Make sure you are building with the right materials.

Paul now shifts to a different image, you know, the one that I've been utilizing throughout this sermon. He takes us from the field to the building. As the wise builder, verse 10, Paul has carefully laid out the right foundation.

[23 : 31] And now, as the foreman, he's working together with subcontractors. But here's the thing, verse 10, each one should build with care.

if earlier, the emphasis was on God as the one who alone gives the growth, now the emphasis falls on the builders as those who one day have to give an account for their work.

If they fail to use the right materials, and they ignore the building code, then their building will collapse like the roof of the stadium arena I mentioned at the beginning.

And that's exactly what the Corinthians were guilty of doing whenever they focused on style, not substance. You see, the church can only have one foundation, Christ and him crucified.

And if you try to lay out an alternative foundation, then you're constructing a completely different building. Even if you would call it a church, it's a fake.

[24 : 44] If Christ is not the main guy, then you can call it Trinity Church, or Grace Church, or Saint This, or Saint That, but it isn't church in the biblical sense.

And it won't last into eternity. But more than that, the subsequent material needs to be the same as the foundation.

As the commentator Paul Barnett helpfully says, as the building rises from its foundations, it must be built of the same teaching about who Jesus is and what he has done for us in his death and resurrection.

For in verses 12 to 15, we are told something sobering. We are told that even if Jesus is the foundation, it is still possible to build on that foundation using inferior and shoddy material.

After all, we have a selection of material to choose from. There's gold or silver or costly stones or wood or hay or straw. But Paul says, in the end, they fall into one of two categories.

[26 : 02] categories. The beginning of verse 15 gives us one category. There's the kind of material that will be burned up in the end. The kind that won't last.

It will all eventually fall apart. And verse 14 gives us the other category. They are the materials that will last. It will survive God's inspection.

It will pass God's quality control. For God will indeed subject our building projects to his assessment.

Look at verse 13. In fact, I'm going to start from verse 12. 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. Do you find that sobering?

[27 : 07] I certainly do. The quality of what I'm building with will be revealed one day. If I'm building with hay and straw, well, the fire will certainly show that that's what I'm building with.

But here's the other thing we must remember. We won't be shown that immediately. According to verse 13, we will only see the true quality of our work on the day of judgment.

What that means then is that it is possible to be building something that you and I think looks extremely impressive now. You know, the church could be doubling in numbers.

People come and say that they feel good here, that the worship is great, that the fellowship is good. The church could be buzzing with activities, with our name in the newspaper because we've recently gotten involved in some charity.

But it's possible to build something impressive looking, but not truly lasting. It's possible to have all that I've just described, good fellowship activities, and have no one actually know the Lord, or be rooted and established in him to be fed meat.

[28 : 32] It's possible to make people assume that they are Christians when they're actually not, or that they are mature when they're actually infants. Now, it might not look obvious because the church might look very lively and its people look so fervent.

But where the gospel is not central, and its ministry is not driven by the word, and its community is not filled with love, it won't last.

But here's the encouragement. The reverse is also true. You could be laboring right now, but the results just don't look impressive.

Perhaps you're looking after the youth group. As week after week, you try to help them understand and apply the Bible. Week after week, you try to let them know that you care, asking them how they are and being interested in their lives.

But the teenagers just look bored and disengaged, and one or two even stop coming. And you just can't help but compare yourself with that other more vibrant youth group down the road, and you wonder what you're doing wrong, whether the word of God and the love of Jesus is truly sufficient.

[29 : 53] But notice, if you are building with the right stuff, helping teenagers progress from milk to meat, well, they are the ones who in 20 years' time will still be following Jesus.

And if you're a Sunday school teacher, or a Bible study leader, or a ministry coordinator, well, you can take the same encouragement as well. And if you are not in a leadership position, then make sure you apply the right criteria when you are working out how a ministry or a church is going.

Don't be fooled by what looks impressive on the surface. Don't judge merely by outward appearance. Take time to see if the church or the ministry leaders are indeed building with care that they are using the right materials.

And if they are, well, take time to encourage them. They are likely discouraged sometimes. Thank your Bible study leader when you see that he's worked hard to prepare the study.

Thank those serving in the ministry when you know that they've tried to put Jesus and others first in their efforts. And the best way you can encourage them is if you yourself willingly and wholeheartedly submit to God's word and show that their efforts in building you are not wasted.

- [31 : 34] For you are showing yourself to be a building that will last. For it will be a real shame if verse 15 is true of us, isn't it?

Verse 15, if it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss, but yet will be safe, even though only as one escaping through the flames.

Now, this verse can sound puzzling, but the basic gist is this. Verse 15 is not talking about salvation, but evaluation. A builder himself can truly be safe, but he could still suffer loss, in the sense that he could see a lifetime of ministry go up in smoke, because he's not built with care.

When the building doesn't match the foundation, God burns it up and tears it down. which takes us more briefly to the other two steps we should take to build God's church.

So here's step number four. Remember who's building this is. Look with me at verse 16. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's spirit lives among you?

- [32 : 58] Now, here Paul isn't referring so much to individuals, but to the church itself as the temple. that's made clearer at the end of verse 17. And in the Old Testament, God's temple isn't just an awesome building, it's a sacred place where you meet with God.

It's the high point of Israel's worship. And now Paul makes this audacious claim. God's people are now the temple. They are the ones who are sacred.

They're the sacred space. And leaders have now been especially entrusted with this particular building. And so no wonder we're given this warning in verse 17.

If anyone destroyed God's temple, God will destroy that person. Now, what can destroy God's temple? There's plenty of options.

Prolonged infighting, as the Corinthians were doing. Wholeheartedly adopting the values of the world, as the Corinthians were also doing. putting all our attention and affections on man, not God, as the Corinthians were doing.

- [34 : 10] Insisting on your rights rather than loving others, as the Corinthians were also doing. And God hates that.

Because this building belongs to him. This building is precious to him. this building is made up of men and women whom he paid for by the blood of his only begotten son.

And so, he will destroy those who seek to destroy the church. For those who don't care about the church, don't actually care about God himself.

Now, it's easy, isn't it, to think of church as just a bunch of people I hang out with on a Sunday, some of whom I get along with, others not so much. But God says, the church is my treasured possession.

And when we forget that, we will treat the church poorly. And when we treat the church poorly, we won't be thinking about how we can build it up well. Indeed, instead, often our focus will only be on how other church members should treat us well.

- [35 : 24] But the thing like that would make sense, especially once we consider step number five. Recognize that in Christ, we actually have everything.

Now, Paul begins this chapter by calling out the Corinthians immaturity. And as he concludes, he says, well, I hope you've matured. I hope you can see now that what you think is wisdom is really nonsense.

Look at verse 19, for example. 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, implication is in verse 21, no more boasting about human leaders.

Stop trying to build the church in the ways of the world. For God has made known a different wisdom. One that chooses the foolish cross as its message.

[36 : 27] One that delights in servants and farm hands. One that understands that the quality of the building can look unimpressive at first.

And so, if this is true, and you know it's true, then Paul says, stop being deceived. Stop thinking that you need to have worldly ways of thinking and building.

And to hammer that home, he makes this stunning statement in verses 21 to 23. 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. You see, Paul is saying, the church no longer has to feel insecure that it doesn't have the best leaders that look good in the eyes of the world, or the best music, or whatever it is.

Why not? Because the entire universe is already yours. That's more or less the big point of verses 21 to 23.

[37 : 38] You don't belong to Paul's group or Apollos' group. In fact, it's the reverse. They belong to you. They serve you as they serve Christ.

And in fact, everything belongs to you. You no longer have to worry about the transience of life and the inevitability of death because the new creation belongs to you.

It's waiting for you. You no longer need to attach yourself to the things of this world because you have an eternal inheritance. Time is of little consequence now because you will last into eternity.

if you belong to Jesus. And if that's true, then we can take a deep breath and relax.

We don't have to get overstressed wondering if we or our leaders look impressive enough. We don't have to worry that we simply don't have the resources to build the church into something that will last.

[38 : 39] And if it looks like things are going well, our ministries are humming along nicely, the people look like they're growing, well, we shouldn't get puffed up either.

We simply keep building brick by brick with the right materials, building on the right foundation, striving to grow, not content to remain as infants, even as we remember God alone gives the growth.

We keep building with the gospel and the word and prayer and love, knowing that this is God's temple we're looking after. And we keep building because on that day, we want what we're building not to burn up, but to survive.

We keep building because we want to hear, praise from God as our reward. So let's just take a moment now to reflect before we pray that we would indeed build what will last.

I'll just give you a few seconds now. heavenly father, heavenly father, we come before you and we just want to commit our church into your hands again.

[40 : 16] we thank you that you have redeemed us and you have seen us fit to dwell among us by your spirit and that you want us to be your glorious temple right now.

father, we just ask that we would indeed build with care. We pray especially for those in leadership positions, elders, deacons, bible study leaders, sunday school teachers, even fathers, heads of the family.

We just pray, Lord, that there would indeed be building with care, building with the right materials, patiently giving people the word of God, giving meat, giving milk, giving all that we need to have all the spiritual nutrients that would nourish us.

So I pray, Lord, that you would help us as a church to continue to aim for that, to long for that, to not be content to remain as infants but to grow and grow up in our salvation, to know you.

So, Father, we do pray that indeed that would be true. we pray that five, ten years from now, you know, we will look at KAC and we'll give you all the praise and all the thanks because we can see that that is true.

[41 : 32] So please, Lord, be at work amongst our fellowship today. Help us to be good stewards, good builders of what you have entrusted to us. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray.

Amen.