

Take Care How You Build

In the name of him to whom we belong and through whom all things are ours, dear friends in Christ: Four Sundays in a row now, our Epistle lessons have been taken from Paul's letter to the Christian church at Corinth. I preached on the first text in that series, and then for the past two weeks we've been following the Gospel readings. Today I'd like to go back to Corinth to shed some light on what Paul has to say in this portion of his letter. It's a fascinating text; one that is often mishandled and misapplied to teach doctrines that, well, that it simply doesn't support. It's only by taking verses and lifting them out their context that teachers can use them to lead their hearers astray. With that in mind, let's focus on what the text actually says and just as important, what it doesn't say.

But first a little contextualizing background: recall that the congregation at Corinth was deeply divided into competing factions. Why? It was largely because the congregation was made up of Greeks who thought like Greeks. And what you had going on in their culture at the time was that everyone considered themselves to be a student or follower of one of the Greek philosophers. "I'm a student of the philosophical school of Plato", one might say. Others would claim to be followers of Socrates or Epicurus or Zeno or a hundred other philosophers, some well known and others rather obscure. No matter. And what these people loved to do in their spare time more than just about anything was to sit around and argue philosophy, each one trying to prove why their chosen philosopher and his ideas were better than the others – in other words, why I'm smart and you're stupid; why I'm right and you're wrong. I know: it doesn't sound very exciting to us; but it's what they did. And let me suggest it beats vegging out in front of the boob tube absorbing whatever worldly philosophy it's feeding you without you even being aware of it.

Anyway, along comes the Apostle Paul with this radical new faith called Christianity. He preaches the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Savior, and by the power of the Holy Spirit several hundred people come to faith and are baptized. The church at Corinth is founded. Paul spends a year and a half there catechizing them in the basics. And then he's off to other places to do evangelism and plant new churches. Before he goes, Paul leaves a man he's trained for the task to be the pastor there. Sometime later a very gifted speaker named Apollos serves as their pastor. At some point the Apostle Peter pays the congregation a visit, and while he's there he's given the opportunity to preach and teach. This was all very good.

Ah, but thinking like Greeks who loved to argue philosophy and their favorite philosophers, the congregation split into factions that claimed to stand behind whichever of these teachers they preferred. "We follow Paul." "We're students of Apollos." "We follow Peter." "We're smart and you're stupid." "We're right and you're wrong."

In the Epistle selections for the past several weeks we've been hearing Paul sharply rebuke the congregation for carrying on like this. You're thinking in a very worldly, fleshly way, he told them; not at all like spiritually mature Christians. The Church is about Jesus Christ and him crucified. He's the focus of our attention. The goal is that we confess together the same hope and trust in Jesus by which we are saved. The pastor or visiting preacher is merely a servant. His job – whoever he is – is to give you Jesus. Think of it this way: the pastor is farm

hand. You are the field of God in which he plants the Word. The pastor is a construction worker. You are God's building that he's raising.

In today's text, Paul elaborates on this second illustration. "Like a skilled master builder" he says, "I laid the foundation, and now someone else is building on it." He's referring to how he first founded the church at Corinth, and how that another pastor was continuing the work there. He explains too what he means by the foundation: it's Jesus Christ – who he is as true God and true man, his holy life, his suffering and death for sin, his resurrection and ascension, his coming return in glory to raise the dead and judge the earth—all those truths that are summed up in the second article of the Church's Creed. That's the foundation. If it's not standing on these fundamental truths, then it's not part of the Church.

And thus, Paul cautions, "Let each one take care how he builds on that foundation." This is a warning to pastors and to anyone who carries authority in the church to teach or to oversee the doctrine of those who do. These are not tasks to be taken lightly. The shepherding of souls is an awesome responsibility, one with eternal consequences. The preacher or teacher had better be careful to proclaim only the truth and to make sure that what he's saying conforms to Scripture. Even here, caution is in order. The raw timber from the same tree might be used to produce firewood or to make toothpicks or to build a home or to create fine furniture. All of these applications would be useful; but obviously they would require different levels of time, effort, and skill to accomplish. On the other hand, the wood might be used to fashion an idol that would not be useful, but rather destructive.

The pastor or teacher has as his raw material the Word of God. That's what he uses to build up the church – the people of God. Each passage of Scripture is useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking, training, and otherwise enhancing the faith of those who hear; but only if it's handled properly. And you can teach things that are 100 percent true and still not be helpful. For example, if the teacher says, "God's Law says, 'Love your neighbor as yourself, and love your enemies too'." That's right. It's a useful application. But if that's where he leaves it, he hasn't done his job. He leaves his hearers condemned under the Law because they don't love their neighbors as themselves and they don't love their enemies. He must always bring them back to the foundation: to Jesus Christ and him crucified. All Scripture points to him and to his saving work. He can talk all day about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, about Joseph, David, and Daniel, about all the saints and characters in the Scripture, but if he doesn't get to Jesus and his Gospel, he's not being helpful. And if he mishandles the text, if he teaches incorrectly, he can destroy consciences. He can ruin lives in time. And possibly even destroy souls in eternity.

Another caution is in order: in the same way that the members of the congregation at Corinth thought in worldly ways and aligned themselves behind their favorite teacher, so there is the temptation for the pastor to think in worldly ways and want to be the guy who is everyone's favorite. The church becomes his personal plaything; a cult of his own personality. So, he might back off when preaching God's Law, tone things down, make people feel good about themselves. He might tell heartwarming stories; chicken soup for the soul kind of things. He might try to be a comedian. Everybody likes funny stories and jokes. In our day there's a move to have the pastor adopt business models for growing the church: attract new members with fads and gimmicks as if he were just selling another product. But none of this is building on the foundation or with the proper materials.

And Paul explains that one day the quality of each pastor's work will be revealed – revealed by fire no less. The good he accomplished when building God's people up with gold, silver, and precious stones – that is the glory and wisdom of the true Gospel – that will survive,

and for it he will be rewarded; rewarded I expect mostly in the form of having the joy of seeing those whom were placed under his care receive the crown of life. The other stuff, the wood, hay, and straw of human wisdom and other nonsense will be burned up. To the extent that he was actually building on the foundation of Jesus Christ, that pastor too will be saved; but Paul says only as through fire. The shoddy work he did will be lost, consumed in flames. Thus again: those charged with the task of proclaiming the Word need to be careful about how they build the church and make sure they are utilizing the best materials and handling them properly.

Now an aside: I mentioned at the beginning of this message that parts of this very text are horribly mishandled. And right here we have a good example. This bit about how a person's work will be revealed by fire is used as the sole passage of canonical Scripture that some say proves the doctrine of Purgatory. The idea is that with few exceptions no one leaves this life in a state of sinless perfection, and therefore there must be a place of suffering – of burning – where sins not otherwise confessed and absolved must be purged away before one can enter into glory. The passage proves no such thing. In context, we see that it has to do with pastors and their work in the church, not with each and every individual and their sins. Besides, the doctrine of a place called Purgatory denies the accomplished work of Christ on the cross. If you still have to suffer for your sins in a temporary hell, then Jesus was not being completely honest when on the cross he said, "It is finished." Don't be led astray.

Returning to the text, Paul declares, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that the God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him." This time I'll begin with the misapplications. First, it's misused to teach that each one of us is *individually* a temple of God. And that directs people to a kind of individualism that fits well with the American spirit of autonomy. If I'm my own temple of God, I don't need anyone else to teach me. I don't need the other members of the church. I can do it all on my own in my own way.

This is just wrong. When Paul says, "you are the temple" and "God's Spirit dwells in you", in both cases the "you's" are plural. Down south they'd say, "Y'all". His point is that *collectively* we are the temple of God. It's particularly when come together as one that God's Spirit indwells us because that's when we are receiving his Spirit through Christ's Word and Sacraments. Paul is stressing our togetherness, our unity, our fellowship in Christ. He's saying this over and against the divisions in the Corinthian congregation. You are not to be broken up into competing factions. We all stand together as the living stones of God's temple on the foundation of Jesus Christ. We all support one another, loving and caring for each member as part of God's temple – the body of Christ.

Yet another misapplication is that some have taught that where it says "if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him" it means that suicide is an unforgivable sin. They say if you are God's temple and destroy yourself, God will certainly destroy you in hell. But again, in context, it's not what the passage says. Paul is speaking of those who are destroying the unity of the congregation with their fractious infighting and their struggle to prove themselves to be better and wiser than the others. Such people, Paul says, God will punish, and rightly so. And don't get me wrong: suicide is a bad thing. It's covered under the 5th Commandment. Don't do it. But this passage has nothing to do with it. And it's not the unforgivable sin. The only sin that is unforgivable is persistent, stubborn, lifelong rejection of the Spirit's work to create saving faith in Christ through the power of God's Word.

All right, to wrap things up, Paul concludes this section of his letter with an exhortation against the prideful conceit that lies behind the divisions in the Corinthian church. God's

wisdom, he stresses, is not like man's wisdom. The latter has no place in the Church. Here we don't strive to be the best or the brightest or the shiniest star. We don't brag about or think of ourselves as more important on account of our favorite preacher or teacher. The Church's true wisdom and its greatest treasure is the foolishness of the cross: The Savior Jesus Christ whom in love God gave for the sins of the world. It's in him that all things are ours – ours equally: the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, the new heaven and earth, and life everlasting. Thus, we renounce any idea of striving for individual glory, and seek instead the greater good and unity of all even as did the Lord Jesus who bought and paid for us with his own blood. To him alone be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!