

“Foundation of Faith” (1 Cor. 3:10-15) Easter 2, March 30, 2008

Thursday morning I woke up as usual to the sounds of National Public Radio. But this was not just any Thursday. This was “Super Thursday.” Fund-raising Thursday. And as I lay there in bed, I heard all the usual fund-raising ploys – how they’re counting on us listeners to keep the broadcast going; and how many benefits we get out of public radio; and really, how little they’re asking us to give. The good part of waking up to this was that got me out of bed faster. The bad part was having to hear it at all – in fact, thinking, “Man, I hate fund-raising!”

And I do! At least, the kind of fund-raising that has to beg people to support what they ought to support anyway. So is that what I’m up here to do today with our *“Foundation of Faith”* emphasis? I sure hope not, because frankly this would be a pretty hard sell. Supporting missionaries to bring the Gospel to those who have never heard it? That’s easy to get excited about! Financing ministries that bring hope and healing to people marginalized by society? That’s easy, too. Even giving above and beyond to build new facilities and renovate old ones so that our church can minister more effectively – that I could pull off. But replacing the funds we borrowed from ourselves to buy adjacent properties – that’s a hard one! If you don’t see the need already, there aren’t a whole lot of poignant pictures or fancy phrases I can use to sell you on it. The best I can do is appeal to experience, common sense, and foresight – none of which are all that exciting. So let me just throw in the towel before I even get started. This is not going to be a fund-raising sermon. More, it’s going to be a perspective sermon on why we are doing what we’re doing, why it matters, and why we need to be prepared for “whatever” before we even start carrying out our long-range plan.

To put things into perspective, let’s begin with the fact that every generation of Christians has a unique calling to carry out God’s work. We can’t just coast along on what others have already done, nor can we put off God’s work for others to do later. There are too many souls to reach, too many people to help, too many lives to change. Faithfulness demands we make the most of every minute, every opportunity! That’s true for the church in general. That’s true for congregations in particular. Now, most people admit this in theory, but in reality it’s very tempting to let nostalgia for the past or distractions in the present get in the way of serving God effectively.

Even the early church had these problems. In Corinth, for instance, Paul had labored long and hard to teach new Christians the Gospel, organize them for ministry, and empower them for outreach. Proud of his work, he wrote, **“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid the foundation...”** But, of course, eventually that start-up time had to come to an end, so Paul had stepped aside and let another pastor to lead the congregation. His name was Apollos. He was somewhat different from Paul but very gifted in his own right. And ideally, he would build on the foundation that Paul had laid, as would still others after him for generations to come.

That was the plan, at least. But the problem was that the folks in Corinth didn't quite get this. There were some who still felt fiercely loyal to their founder. *Ah, for the good old days when Paul was here! If only things could be like they were back then!* But naturally, there were others who preferred the new pastor. *Apollos is so much more eloquent than Paul! Now that he's here, things should take off!* There was also a group that felt loyal to Peter. *Now, there is a man who's got the right stuff! He actually knew Jesus personally!* And there were still others who said, no doubt with noses up in the air: *Our loyalty is to Christ!* No one could say church life in Corinth was boring! But as long as they focused on personalities and divided up into cliques, God's work would suffer. So one reason Paul sent them this letter to give them some perspective. What mattered, he said, was not who laid the foundation. That was a done deal. What mattered was how they built on the foundation – that they did it well! After all, he said, **“no foundation can anyone lay but the one that has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ,”** but **“let each builder choose with care how to build upon it.”**

Some 2,000 years later, that's the question before us: **“how to build upon”** the foundation of faith. We, too, had a founding pastor and a founding generation who laid a firm foundation for us in Christ. We, too, have had succeeding generations of pastors and members who built upon that foundation. When Pastor Peisker and Pastor Reitan were here, the great need was establishing our basic ministries and facilities. They built well on the foundation of faith. When Pastor Gedde was here, the congregation's great focus was on reaching beyond our doors – especially with TV ministry and the Tri-Cities Chaplaincy. They built well on the foundation of faith. Now we are about to launch a long-range plan that continues both emphases. Our mission is *“to help people build strong, effective Christian lives with the resources of God's grace.”* To do that among ourselves, we mean to focus especially on adult spiritual growth, with particular emphasis on small group ministry, prayer ministry, support ministry, and worship. To do that beyond our doors, we mean to reach out to the deaf, the hard-of-hearing, and the visually-impaired; we plan to start a pre-school and college-age ministries; we envision mission-partners on every continent. And for both in-reach and outreach we eventually hope to develop our own retreat center.

Then too, there's also the practical question of where to house our ministries. We're bursting at the seams! Parking is at a premium! We need more elbow room! And that is why we bought three adjacent properties. With about an acre more to work with, we should be able to remodel and expand enough to accommodate present ministry and significant future growth.

So the what, the where, and the why are clear. But **“how to build”** on the foundation – is that clear? Using Paul's words, how do we build with **“gold, silver, and precious stones”** instead of **“wood, hay, or straw”**? The quick answer would be that we need to build with faith, devotion, generosity, and wisdom. All true! But what does that actually look like in concrete terms? Especially doing it with wisdom?!

I can't paint the whole picture, but here is part of what it looks like. Some 15 years ago, my friend's church was doing a major expansion of its facilities. When they were about a quarter of the way into it, the city suddenly told them that they would have to pay for a new connection with the water main. The price tag was \$250,000! At that point, they couldn't just put the expansion on hold. Everything was all torn up. But at the time, \$250,000 was nearly half their annual budget.

For us, that would be just under a third of our budget. But to put things into perspective, think for a moment what that would do to us if we suddenly got hit with an unexpected bill for \$250,000. One option would be laying off most of our staff. Another option would be cutting all support for ministries like Habitat, Lutheran Community Services, and The Chaplaincy...plus every penny we spend on outreach, worship, nurture, children, youth, lay ministry, and property. In other words, a bill like that would totally gut our ministry!

It would, that is, *unless* we had reserves to fall back on. My friend's church did. They had some wise heads on their building finance committee who made sure they did. And yes, this unexpected expense still stretched them pretty tight, but ministry didn't suffer, the building program continued, and once it was done, the congregation grew significantly – in numbers, in spiritual vitality, and in outreach. All because they did “**choose with care how to build upon**” the foundation.

Now, of course, there are always those who scoff at such precautions. They say, “*You just have to have faith. Building up reserves for ‘whatever’ shows you don’t trust that God will provide.*” Such talk always reminds me of a young father I used to know. His parents had raised him to believe that buying life insurance showed lack of faith. *You just have to trust that God will provide.* Well, one terrible day he got shot in the head. After spending a year in a coma, he died – leaving his wife with five kids under the age of six, huge medical bills...and no life insurance. Frankly, his parents didn't do diddly to help out his wife and his kids. Her parents did what they could. So did their Growth Group and our church. So God did provide. They did manage. But boy, was it tough! And I can't imagine that God wouldn't have preferred this man to show a little wisdom in buying life insurance. I can't imagine that God wouldn't have preferred him to spare his wife and kids and in-laws all those unnecessary financial burdens on top of their grief. Can you? Having faith that God will provide doesn't mean blowing off obvious precautions. Not for individuals. Not for churches. There is a world of difference between hoarding funds and setting aside something for a rainy day. That's just wise. That's just prudent. That's just being faithful stewards.

...Which brings us back to the reason for this “*Foundation of Faith*” emphasis. We have a very clear picture of what God is calling us to do and why. If we build well on the foundation of faith, we will leave behind a powerful legacy! This will be seen as the time when prayer really became a top priority for us! This will be seen as the time when we took a mega-leap forward in spiritual growth! This will be seen as the time when the Holy Spirit fired up our witness, fired up our

worship, fired up our love for one another, fired up our compassion for others! This will be seen as the time when we moved up to a whole higher level of passion for Jesus Christ! What exciting possibilities! Yet, how easy it would be to shoot them down with one major unexpected expense that first guts our on-going ministry, then throws the congregation into turmoil, and finally drains us of our zeal for the Lord's work – all because we were too “spiritual” to make sure we had some financial reserves set aside! My friends, there is a good reason why we say “the devil is in the details!” And isn't that especially true with unforeseen details?! We can't foresee everything that might possibly go wrong, but we can reasonably expect something to go wrong. That is why we need to prepare ahead for “whatever” by making sure we've got some reserves to fall back on. That's just wise. That's just prudent. That's just being faithful stewards.

And actually, the same is true for when things go right. Many have said it had to be God's doing that the three adjacent properties came on the market just as we were adopting our long-range plan. I agree. What an opportunity! And wasn't it wonderful that we had reserves available to take advantage of it! Well, who knows what other opportunities God might have in mind? Chances are good He has some up His sleeve! But will we be able to take advantage of those opportunities? This is another good reason to be financially prepared. Whether things go wrong or go right, we need some reserves to fall back on. Here again, that's just wise. That's just prudent. That's just being faithful stewards.

So Paul's words are very pertinent to our situation: **“No foundation can anyone lay but the one that has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ,”** but **“let each builder choose with care how to build upon it.”** That's why we're having this *“Foundation of Faith”* emphasis – to make sure we build with care. I know there's nothing exciting about doing this. I know there's nothing flashy or poignant about the rationale. Really, this is kind of a “grown-up” thing – like setting aside money for your kids' college or paying your life insurance premiums. We're doing it because it needs to be done, because doing it now will put us ahead in the long run. And that's important! May future generations never say of us that we missed incredible opportunities because we were caught unprepared, too tight or short-sighted to plan ahead! May they say instead that we built well upon the foundation of faith, that we built with **“gold, silver, and precious stones,”** that we left a spiritual legacy that enriched our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren for ages to come! Yes, may they say of us: *They did “choose with care how to build upon” the foundation of faith.* Amen.