

FOUNDATIONS

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. ⁹For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. ¹⁴If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward.

(I Corinthians 3:5-14, NRSV)

Today after the service my family and I will cram ourselves into the remaining space in our minivan for our annual trek to Block Island. The rest of the van is packed with child-friendly food, suitcases, baseballs, gloves, bats, Frisbees, indoor toys in case it rains, and two very special stuffed animals, a bear named Pooh and a dog named Gus. We've got four bicycles on the back of the van and 5 lawn

chairs tied on top. With our primary goal of sand and surf, we've got beach toys coming out our ears—buckets, shovels, beach balls, goggles, skim boards, and boogie boards. While on the beach we'll dig holes and build sandcastles. All will go well until the tide comes in, the waves wash over, the sandcastle crumbles, and the sides of the deep hole cave in and fill up with wet sand, disappearing in a matter of minutes. It's an object lesson every year as I recall Jesus' parable about the foolish man who built his house upon the sand and the wise man who built his house upon the rock.

There was a wise man back in the 1940's who served as a Baptist preacher while holding down other jobs to try and make ends meet. Without a doubt, he gave the best moral and religious advice he could to his three children, two daughters and a son. The family was poor, struggling on the edge of poverty, making a little money and then losing it in some unforeseen misfortune. While still a boy, the son "...scouted up some jobs for before and after school so that he could help the family. He delivered newspapers, mowed grass, baled hay, anything he could find. Between [the dad and the son], money was coming in, and the [family was] able to settle in a home just off a dirt road [in rural Middle America]" (Kurt Eichenwald, *Conspiracy of Fools: A True Story*, chapter 1 excerpt at www.randomhouse.com).

Though they had little money, the parents were determined to send their children to college. The son's "...big moment in college came in his sophomore year, when he signed up for introductory economics, taught by a popular professor, Pinkney Walker. [The young man] found himself mesmerized by Walker's lectures laying out free-market theories; *this*, he decided, was what he wanted to study. Walker was impressed with the smart young man and became a mentor for [him]. With Walker's encouragement, [the young man] stayed on at school after his senior year to

obtain his master's degree. But that was enough for [him]; he was eager to get out and start earning some money” (Ibid.).

To say that he earned *some* money would be an understatement. In time, he made millions and millions of dollars every year. No matter how much money he made, the rich man never forgot his humble beginnings. He gave generously to help the less fortunate. He lent his name to many crucial causes. He was the go to guy in his city. And his father, the Baptist preacher, must have been so proud, for the son remained a deeply religious man (although it should be noted that he *did* become a Methodist!).

Not only was he rich and generous, but he also made the right friends, politicians who eventually, with his financial backing, made it to the Oval Office. There was talk that maybe he'd go into politics after retiring. Maybe he'd run for mayor or get appointed to a cabinet level position by the President. And then, seemingly overnight, his name and the name of his company became synonymous with all that was wrong with corporate America and greedy, out of control CEO's. He broke the law. He was charged, tried, and convicted, but he'll never serve a day in prison, because Ken Lay died on July 5. He was only 64.

What happened to this guy? His Horatio Alger, rags to riches, only in America story made him a corporate hero in the 1990's. No doubt his father and mother laid a good foundation. He could be generous, compassionate, and everything else a good Christian ought to be. But there was another Ken Lay that very few people saw, someone who broke the law and cost thousands of Enron employees their retirement funds, while he continued making millions. Some have compared his life to a Greek tragedy, where hubris brings down even the most seemingly invulnerable in the end. How could he be both of these people? What happened to that solid foundation?

Today's scripture lesson from Paul's first letter to the Christians living in Corinth emphasizes not only the importance of a solid foundation, but also the importance of the structure that follows. According to Victor Paul Furnish, a New Testament professor retired from Southern Methodist University, "It is probable that Paul's first visit to Corinth, and therefore his founding of a congregation there (see Acts 18:11-18), took place in 50-51 [AD]...The purpose of I Corinthians is to deal with a number of specific problems Paul understands to be endangering the Christian life and witness of his congregation in Corinth" (*Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, pp. 202).

While Paul feels certain that he laid a good foundation for the congregation, in his absence things have gone awry. The church is full of factions and in-fighting. They're split about the relative importance of various spiritual gifts, some arguing that to have an authentic experience with God a person must speak in tongues and have ecstatic visions. The congregation was divided on economic lines between rich and poor. This split even affected how they shared Communion. In the Corinthian church, as in many churches of the day, the Lord's Supper was originally a full meal with the bread and cup shared at the end of the meal, as a sacramental act (*Ibid.* p. 622-623). The problem was that the rich people, who did not work the same long hours as the poor, started the meal before the less fortunate church members even arrived. To add insult to injury, the rich ate the best food before the others made it to the table and this was likely the best meal these struggling members would have the entire week. Besides, couldn't the rich feast sumptuously whenever they chose?

Food caused further divisions within this fractured congregation. Being a city in Greece, Corinth contained many pagan temples where people went to make animal sacrifices. After those who worked at the temples took all

the meat they needed, the rest was sold to help support the temple. Meat was a luxury in those days, easily afforded by the rich, who could buy the best meat on the market. Not the poor. When they could scrape together enough money to buy meat, it was usually this less expensive meat sold by the pagan temples. The rich believed that good Christians should not eat the meat that had been offered to idols. On the other hand, the poor had no problem with this practice. Another divisive issue involved a man who was living incestuously with his stepmother. Finally, each faction within the congregation sought to bolster its position by invoking the name of important Christian leaders including Paul, Peter, and Apollos.

This last issue is the background for today's passage where Paul argues that authentic spirituality has nothing to do with following one human leader over another. After all, as Christians, shouldn't Christ be our true foundation? Shouldn't love of God, our neighbors, and ourselves be the bedrock upon which our lives are built? And yet we do not always choose the best building materials. Paul writes, "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward" (1 Corinthians 3:12-14). If we choose weak building materials, wood, hay, or straw, when the fiery times of life come our way, the foundation will disappear in flames. However, if we choose the highest quality materials such as gold, silver, and precious stones, then life's fires will never consume them. In fact, precious metals are purified by fire.

Sure, Paul's analogy breaks down a bit. We would never actually use precious metals or stones as a literal foundation. His point is that we need to build the foundation

of our lives out of the very best materials we can find, materials that will ground us securely and last a lifetime.

One minister notes that world famous architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, emphasized that, "...when you're constructing a home, a church, a building of any kind...remember the most important thing is not what's visible. It's not the creative design or the windows or what's above the surface. What's most important of all is what's invisible, the foundation. For if the foundation isn't strong it doesn't matter how beautiful everything else looks"

(<http://www.fapc.org/sermons/resource/franklloydwright.PDF>). These wise words were written by the Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell, former pastor of Manhattan's prestigious Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church and former chair of the Board of Trustees at Princeton Theological Seminary. Sadly, his own foundation gave way last year when he was accused of having an affair with a married woman in his congregation.

None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes. Ken Lay was not perfect. Lay's actions hurt innocent people who will likely pay for his mistakes the rest of their lives. What lesson can we learn from Ken Lay's life? From the outside his life looked beautiful, he had it all. But while the party went on upstairs, the foundation was cracking, and eventually his business and his reputation came crashing down. He may have laid a good foundation in life at one time. But eventually he became sloppy; he became lazy; he became greedy; he became too enamored with his own image as a business tycoon. Down deep under the soil of his life where he thought no one would ever look, he began adding wood, hay, and straw to his life's foundation. The structure he built over it could not survive the flames of life or the scrutiny of the law.

How about us? In truth we are forever building our lives, choosing the building materials day by day. Do we

need to reinforce our foundation by committing ourselves to more closely follow the life and teachings of Jesus? Do we have some relationships that have gotten rough? With God's help, do we need to get out the sandpaper and work on the rough spots until all is smooth? Do we need to be more intentional about spending time with God? Have our spiritual lives gotten stale? With God's help, we can remodel, add a fresh coat of paint, or simply rearrange the furniture by trying something new or recommitting ourselves to the basics (Ibid). All the while, we must keep an eye on our foundation, for as our house expands, the foundation comes first.

With God's help, we can build lives with solid foundations and sturdy structures. With God's help, our lives can be grounded and strong enough to withstand any storms or fires in life come what may. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, creator of the earth and our creator, we praise you for your many gifts to us, including the natural world. The beauty of nature lifts our spirits and inspires our souls. We stand amazed at your creative brilliance—the sparking waves and the twinkling stars, the tiny atoms and the swirling galaxies. Help us find time for solitude and spiritual refreshment in your world of wonders. May these summer days cause us to rejoice in you and revel in the beauty of your creation, through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.