

Builders or Demolishers

1 Corinthians 3:10-17

The date of Jesus' crucifixion has been confirmed as 3 April 33. After the Lord's resurrection 3 days later and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost a couple of months after that, the Christian church underwent a spectacularly meteoric growth. In those first few years 1000s believed the gospel and joined the church. However, as the church grew exponentially so did the opposition and persecution. The Church's arch nemesis was of course Paul.

In those days he was still called Saul, and he did his level best to demolish the infant church. In his rage to quench the fires of gospel revival he was like a foolish fireman hosing down an oil fire like a wood fire. But pouring water on an oil fire simply disperses the fire which is exactly what happened: the Christians scattered throughout all the regions of Judea and beyond into Gentile territory. As they went, these lay Christians told Jews and Gentiles the Gospel of Christ.

By AD35 Saul had undergone the most famous conversion in history when on his way North to Damascus he encountered the Risen Jesus himself. The Lord commissioned Saul - or Paul as he would be known from then on, to be no longer the gospel's greatest opponent but its greatest proponent, indeed exponent! Paul obediently preached the gospel and birthed new churches of disciples of Jesus.

Paul the church demolisher was transformed into Paul the church builder. It's really important to appreciate that when Paul preached the gospel of Christ it was not only to save people as individuals by making them disciples of Christ but to build God's church, the body of Christ. He did this all around Turkey and finally in Greece. He even began a church in the infamously pagan city Corinth.

In his Acts of the Apostles chap 18, Luke says that while in Corinth Paul was dragged before a Roman tribunal but that the proconsul Gallio dismissed the

charges. Roman historical sources say that Gallio's appointment in Corinth began in July of 51; so, Paul must have birthed the church at Corinth that year.

Well, it was a pretty scary place to build a church. Corinth was infamously immoral and it was full of pagan temples. Overlooking the city on top of the 600 metre high rock acropolis was the temple of Aphrodite with its 1000 female slaves prostituted for pagan religion. The spiritual atmosphere was totally toxic and the reaction of the city to the gospel was violent opposition.

Paul was as valiant a missionary as ever was but even he needed support.

Acts 18:9 One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. Remarkably, and against all the odds, all sorts of people – Jews, Romans and Greeks believed Paul's preaching about Jesus Christ and him crucified, and a new church was birthed in this most inhospitable of places.

Paul moved on to preach the gospel and to build new churches. Four years later in 55 he wrote the letter we call 1Corinthians. It appears the church had become a remarkable success. No mention of persecution anymore – had the city come to accept its newest place of worship and its new deity, Jesus Christ? Given the prosperity Aphrodite brought the city, the more deities the merrier! The church had blended nicely into the city's culture, which was the big problem!

As Christians who had believed in Jesus as their Lord, they had received the Holy Spirit. Paul addressed his letter ^{1Co 1:2} To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Their lives had been made holy by the blood of Christ and in faith and love they ought to have led holy lives for Christ. Yet rather than behaving as disciples of Christ they were just like the rest of the world – divided and quarrelling, believing any foolishness

the world thought to be wisdom. The Christians of Corinth merged so well with their city that they were indistinguishable from their fellow citizens. Paul says, ^{1Co 3:1} Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ.

In fact the church had been so compromised by their worldly spirituality, their childish behavior & rank immorality that the integrity of the body of Christ was under threat. They were in mortal danger of becoming church demolishers.

Last week's epistle ended with Paul trying to restore their sense of identity. ^{1Co 3:9} For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. The 'we' are Paul and another great preacher called Apollos. Note that in describing the nature of the church Paul uses both a rural and an urban image – field and building. Jesus was more familiar with a rural setting and so often used analogies of farming and rural life whereas Paul being the sophisticated city-slicker expands on the urban analogy: you are God's building – one of the most important themes of this epistle. In chapters 12-14 Paul will urge us in build the body of Christ.

Building can refer to both the process of construction and also the finished product ready for habitation and use. Spiritually, God's building is both: we're always in the process of being built until the Lord returns; and we're also the final product in that as God's building we are ready for habitation and use. Paul goes on... ¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Paul is always quick to point out his credentials as Christ's ambassador. He had begun the letter introducing himself ^{1Co 1:1} Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God ... Paul has not come to them on his own authority as if preaching the gospel and building churches was his great idea. Paul is their apostle, and ours, by the will of God. God gave him this grace of apostleship at his conversion where he was at once forgiven for having been a church demolisher and commissioned as a church builder.

Indeed he has become an expert builder: literally, *wise architect*. In contrast to those that would build God's church using human wisdom, Paul has laid the foundation of the church using only Jesus Christ himself.

When you drive by a construction site and all you see is a great hole in the ground with excavating machines digging away, you know that they are laying the foundations for a great building. You don't have to be an architect to understand that the bigger the building the deeper the foundations. The foundation that Paul laid for the church at Corinth, and every other church that he built, was not a hole in the ground for the church he is speaking of was not an inanimate building of wood and stone but the living building of God's people.

The foundation Paul laid was Jesus Christ: in preaching and in person. The preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the foundation of the church because the church is built as people hear about Jesus Christ and him crucified. As they believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour they are incorporated (or baptized as Paul will put it in Ch 12) into his body – no gospel no Jesus; no Jesus no church.

And there's a personal dimension too – as we believe in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit and thereby come into relationship with Father God through his Son. We come to not only know about Jesus but to know him personally. Jesus' church is founded on the personal union that his disciples have with him & each other through his Spirit. Know gospel know Jesus; know Jesus know his church.

¹² If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day (of Judgement) will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴ If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Each man's work means each member of the church will be tested for being a builder or a demolisher. A building of bricks and glass can remain unchanged for decades - but the real church of God's people is never static: it is either being

built or being demolished. The living church is built as the gospel is preached and obeyed; it is built by the members of the church who live the gospel of Christ serving God in faith, hope and love, and walk in the Holy Spirit.

This is the gold silver and precious stones Paul expected them to use to build the church of God. Instead the Corinthians had turned to the wood hay and straw of human wisdom. The divisions and quarrelling, idolatry and immorality were demolishing the building of God founded on his Son. Paul pulls no punches when warning them of the very serious consequences of their actions.

¹⁶ Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. The personal pronouns are plural which mean that Paul is speaking to all the members of the church collectively as God's temple. Later in chap. 6 Paul will say that each individual Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit too, but here the emphasis is the church all together as God's temple.

Everyone understood that to destroy God's holy temple was to invite disaster – God will destroy him - yet this is precisely what the Corinthian Church risked. Now we really ought to take this to heart. The Corinthians began with the good foundation of Jesus Christ but they had turned away from being builders to actually demolishing their own church and without even realising it!

I am grateful for this construction of brick, steel and glass which we call Saint Peter's Church – surely God's gracious provision to his living church, the body of Christ. I am even more deeply thankful that the living church of Saint Peter's Weston was laid with the foundation of Jesus Christ and that for 30 years we have been building God's church with gold silver and precious stones. Every one of us is answerable to God for how he or she helps to build God's temple and we can be confident that God will graciously reward all our efforts.

However, the challenge for us is to keep on building on the foundation of Jesus Christ and him crucified. We will be wise to heed the fate of the

Corinthians for we will be surely temped to revert to human wisdom or religious tradition or worldly ambitions or whatever will demolish the great work begun. This is a church of builders & we will keep building God's temple for Jesus sake