

**Temples of Straw**  
**1 Corinthians 4:5-17**  
**Summer Sermon Series**  
**June 20, 2010**  
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Every age presents challenges for people of faith. Every time in history calls forth new responses from the church. But some eras are particularly challenging and we are in the midst of one of them. The church of today is facing profound and tumultuous changes. Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer observes that "the only way to understand what is currently happening to twenty-first-century Christians in North America is to first understand that about every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale. And...we are living in one of those five-hundred-year sales." (Quoted in *The Great Emergence* by Phyllis Tickle, p. 16) Or, to put it another way, every five hundred years the structures of the church have grown so rigid and unwieldy and the world around us has changed so dramatically, that every thing gets turned upside down so that renewal and growth can occur.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther reacted against the abuses he saw in the Roman Catholic Church of his day, nailed his 95 theses on a church door in Germany, and the Protestant Reformation was born. Five hundred years before that, the Roman Catholic Church, centered in Rome, broke with the Eastern Orthodox Church, centered in Constantinople. And five hundred years before that, the church was dealing with the fall of the Roman Empire, and how to preserve the gospel message amid the tremendous upheavals and strife of the day.

Lots of people believe that we are in one of these every five hundred years rummage sales; that we are going through a time when we in the church are forced to rummage around in our attics and garages and basements and figure out what we as a church need to keep and what we need to get rid of. That's why our series on 1 Corinthians is so timely. 1 Corinthians is an instruction manual on how to be the church. Paul, after all, is writing to people who have *no idea* what it means to be the church. They are, as he says earlier in chapter 3, babies in the faith. Paul writes about 20 years after the death of Jesus; neither he nor the Corinthians have what we have—2000 years of history and tradition and teachings on what the church should be. In Paul's day, every one had to make it up and figure it out as they went along. No one knew exactly what it meant to be the church.

So as we try to figure out what it means to be the church in the twenty-first century, this first century manual on how to be the church can help us to figure out what we need to let go of and what we should keep on to as we hold our every 500 year church rummage sale.

Because the whole idea of church is brand new for everybody, because Paul is writing to people that a few years—or a few weeks—ago were worshiping Zeus or Ares or Aphrodite, throughout the letter Paul uses a variety of images or metaphors to explain what it means to be a Christian community. In today's passage, he uses three metaphors to explain this strange new thing called the church. So instead of reading the scripture all at once, I want us to look at Paul's images for the church one by one, and tease out for ourselves what the lessons are for us today.

Turning to chapter 3, beginning at verse 5, we see Paul returning, as he does throughout the letter, to the problem of divisions within the Corinthian church. Some Corinthians claim allegiance to Paul, who founded the church. Others are fans of Apollos, the silver-tongued orator who followed Paul to Corinth. Paul is trying to help the Corinthians understand how ridiculous their quarrels are.

*5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. 9 For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.*

Paul's first metaphor for the church is agricultural—the church is a field. Paul planted the crop and Apollos watered it, but it is God who gave the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose—the Greek literally means they are one. The growth Paul speaks of is not numerical, but spiritual. Paul longs for the Corinthians to cease being such babies, and to grow into spiritual maturity.

Paul's words are true for us today. Too often we in the church are competitive rather than collaborative. Some of the most vicious battles I have seen in local churches have been over turfism—this is MY job, this is MY area. We might as well say, this is MY field, not God's. Rather than working together for the greater glory of God, we subdivide the field that is the church until it becomes a bunch of tiny, unproductive subsistence plots.

Pastors are particularly guilty of this. We are a highly competitive and frequently envious bunch. We look at other pastors' crops and wonder why they seem to be doing

so much better than we are. At clergy meetings, it's all about seeing who's up and who's down. It isn't pretty.

All of us, lay and clergy alike, need to remember that all of us water what someone else has planted. And the growth, if it comes, gives glory not to us, but to God.

In the final words of the passage, Paul shifts to a new metaphor, "You are God's building."

*10 According 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. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 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. 14 If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. 15 If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.*

Paul, the master builder, has laid a solid foundation on which to build the church. That foundation is Jesus Christ. We are subcontractors who build on this foundation. With what materials are we building? Paul lists six possibilities—gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw. The list invites us to ask ourselves: Are we building Christ's church using the best possible materials? Or are we building temples of straw that will disintegrate in the storms of time?

There is sometimes concern about the quality of Habitat for Humanity houses, because they are built up, by and large, by amateurs. So I was both moved and amused by the story of a hurricane that had swept through south Florida some years ago and leveled many of the homes there. But every single one of the homes build by Habitat

for Humanity was left standing. These houses had been built by amateurs, but the word *amateur* comes from Latin word for love. An amateur is someone who does something for love, and the amateurs who put up the Habitat houses had lovingly put about twice as many nails in their houses as the pros do. The Habitat houses were built with love, and those houses weathered the storm.

There is a lesson in this us. Are we building the church with love? Or are we building the church with self-interest and petty in-fighting? Are we building looking backward rather than upward? Are we building with the best possible materials, or with the leftovers of our lives? Are we building with fear or with faith?

Every year in this country, 3500 to 4000 churches close their doors. This is a sign of the great tumult we are in. I have known some of those churches which have closed. Some of them have been churches that have been more concerned with propriety and process than the gospel. Some of them have been more concerned with looking good than doing good. Some of them had forgotten how to pray, how to worship, how to serve. Some of them refused to grow spiritually forgot the demands of the gospel, turned away new ideas, and alienated newcomers. Some of these churches that are closing have killed themselves by their pettiness, their infighting, and their turfism. They built with straw, and the fires of change consumed them.

Our vision, adopted three years ago, was to be a multi-generational church. Implicit in that vision is that we are building this church for generations to come, that we are building this church so that children not yet born will learn the gospel of Jesus Christ here. But building solidly for the future means building on the foundation that

Paul shows us is essential. The foundation of the church is Jesus Christ, and the church we build on that foundation must reflect Christ. It must be built, not with straw, but with faith, with self-sacrifice, with generosity of spirit, with a passion for justice and with care for the least among us. It must be built with forgiveness and understanding and hope and joy and laughter and above all, with love.

Which brings us to Paul's third metaphor for the church, which builds on the previous one (pun intended!)

*16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

We usually read this passage individualistically, that each of us individually is God's temple, and that is true. But Paul uses the plural form of "you" here. He is not talking primarily about individuals. He is speaking collectively, saying that it is the community of faith that is God's temple and that the Spirit of God dwells within this sacred community.

The community of faith is God's dwelling place. Paul cannot imagine being Christian apart from the church. This is something we need to pay attention to, because we live in an individualistic age. We live in a time of Burger King Religion, when people want to "have it their way." We live in a time when people who say they believe in God distrust or feel no need for the church, when many people say that they are "spiritual but not religious." This is so common that there is an acronym for it—SBNR (**S**piritual **B**ut **N**ot **R**eligious). And even a Facebook page devoted to those who are SBNR. A recent post on that page read:

*It is refreshing to see a community of people who are pursuing [sic] authentic spirituality free of religion. I have been on a journey of my own; trying to break free of a lifetime of immersion in the institutional Christian church. The conversations and positive perspectives here are inspirational. Thanks!*

Our first inclination may be to dismiss the concerns of the SBNR, but I think the church needs to own its responsibility for giving birth to the spiritual but not religious. We need to ask ourselves why these people feel they have to leave the church to find God. We need to own that people like the man who put up that post have turned away from the church because they don't see Jesus Christ in the church. Instead of Jesus' love and compassion, they see self-righteousness and judgment and hypocrisy and pettiness. As one bumper sticker puts it, "I love God but I can't stand his fan club."

It isn't going to be trends or new worship styles or technology or focus groups or bigger and better buildings or mega churches or house churches or Bible studies or praise songs or old time religion or better seminary education or more comprehensive leader development or evangelism programs or outreach ministries that will save the church as we muddle through this five-hundred year upheaval. The church will be saved only as the church is the church. Only as we let ourselves be a sacred community, the temple of God, the dwelling place of the Spirit, built on Jesus Christ, and reflecting his grace and love in all that we do and all that we are.