

Sermon—September 4-5, 1999
Rich Nathan
Series
1 Corinthians 3:5-17

What is the Church

Over the next couple of months I plan to do a new series on the church and our relationships with each other. Here at the Columbus Vineyard we have been growing very rapidly and I am not sure that many people really understand what it means to be part of a church. I have often joked about people's reactions when you invite them to church. I know that if you gave most Americans a free association test with the word "church" there would be a negative reaction.

Do you know what free association is? What comes to mind when you hear the following words?

Dog – Cat

Chocolate – Vanilla

Yankees – World Series Winners again

Well, if you said to the average American, "What comes to mind when you hear the word "church" many people would say, "Boring, stiff, robes, pews."

I was on the stationary bike at the gym just the other day reading one of the Time Magazines that they had on a rack there. They were talking about American movies during the Depression. The author three or four times mentioned church opposition. And the way the author used the word "church" in this article on

Hollywood and the movie industry was to always associate church with censorship, opposition to the forces of progress, excessive prudishness, life-killing, joy-killing. I am not even sure the author was really conscious about what he was doing—if this was a deliberate assault on church and Christianity or, rather, just one of those unconscious givens. But clearly in the author's mind, church was like that old definition of a Puritan that I have shared with you before. The image of a Puritan is that of a man in a black coat with a stiff collar sitting on a stump sucking on a lemon, while he worries that someone somewhere might be having fun.

That is the popular understanding of church. Someone somewhere might be having fun, let's try to stop it together.

I remember as a child I was given a book on world religions. Talk about free association. This book on world religions had these big colored plates of each of the world's religions. I remember the picture for Judaism was a family sitting around a Passover table. There was this wonderful meal laid out on the table and this picture of family togetherness. Judaism and family warmth were associated. And then in the picture of Hinduism, they had an Indian woman holding a baby, a picture of bonding. I remember the picture of Christianity because of the emotional impression that it left on me for years. The picture that they used for Christianity was a gothic Cathedral with a dark stained glass window. The image was very forbidding—this dark, medieval lifeless place, where mean people get together to receive lessons in judging each other. That's the church.

Well, over the next couple of months I want to revise our image of the church and spend some time talking about our relationships with each other. When we

look at the picture of the church in the Bible, there are a number of things, of course, that the church is not. The church is **not** a material building. This weekend we are going to have a party in which we get to take a tour of the new building that we are building on this property to house our church. But the church is not the building. The building that we are building is simply where our church gathers.

And the church is **more** than a crowd that comes together to hear a message without relationship to each other and without relationship to God. The church is not even a human organization. It is not a building or a crowd. It is not simply a social club or a good support group in times of difficulty. We all need our support networks and the church just happens to work for you or for me.

Over the next couple of weeks I want to present to you some biblical pictures of the church, some models. Years ago I heard a teaching regarding images and models of the church that I found helpful. The speaker said that when you look at the church, you have to always think in terms of one of those children's kaleidoscopes—one of those little cardboard kaleidoscopes. I don't know if they still make them anymore. If you asked someone under the age of 18 about a kaleidoscope with shifting images, they would probably say something like, "Oh yeah, I know what you mean. They are called a screen saver." But a kaleidoscope of images is a helpful picture to keep in mind when you think about the church.

You see the Bible presents to us a kaleidoscope of images, when it wishes to communicate to us truths that can't be captured by any one single picture. So when the Bible speaks to us about who Jesus Christ is we see that Jesus Christ is so infinitely great that one single metaphor, one single image, is not enough. So the

Bible speaks of Christ as being our advocate before the Father—the one who argues our cases and stands in as our defense attorney.

Jesus is the bridegroom who calls us into intimate relationship with himself, as a groom would with his bride.

Jesus is a shepherd who gives wandering sheep like us direction in life.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who died as a sacrifice to pay for our sins.

There are literally hundreds of titles and metaphors and pictures that the Bible uses for the Lord Jesus Christ, because one image is not enough. And the same thing is true for the church. According the Bible, the church is a building being raised up by Christ.

It is the temple of God.

It is the people of God.

It is the flock of God.

The Vine.

The Field.

The City of God.

The Pillar of Truth.

The bride of Christ.

The body of Christ.

One writer, Paul Minear in his book Images of the Church in the New Testament lists some 96 different images. But even if you ruled out a few of his images as not really being the church, it is apparent that the New Testament has a rich kind of imagery as it tries to capture this enormous mystery – the mystery of the church.

And we must always maintain this kaleidoscope of images. One of the problems that local churches have, is that they get stuck in only one of the Bible's images of the church. So, for example, the church might see itself according to the one Bible image of the church as the pillar and bulwark of the truth. And what you always hear in that particular church is that we teach the truth. And what people need is sound doctrine. The church becomes obsessed with purity of doctrine, straining out every gnat and seeing itself as the sole possessors of all truth with a doctrine purer than any other church in the city.

Where the church fails is in expressing the other images of church life. For example, we are to be a family, connected with each other as brothers and sisters with God as our Father and Jesus as our elder brother. We can never become fixated or camp in one image, however wonderful that image of the church is. We always have to rotate the kaleidoscope.

The vision that God has put in my heart for the Columbus Vineyard is that we would be a group of people that as best as we are able we could reflect all of the various images and pictures of the church that we see in the Bible. I would love to be part of a church about which people would say all over the city and, indeed, all over the world, that church is more than just a preaching station where people come to hear a great message. Or that church is more than just a great worship center where people come to experience dynamic worship. Or that church is wonderful in sending out missionaries. Or that church practices spiritual gifts.

I would love for Vineyard Church of Columbus to be known as a church that does it all. A church that runs on all eight cylinders. That people understand the

Columbus Vineyard as a place that helps folks integrate the Bible with the rest of their lives. That this would be a place where people get their marriages put back together and where people who have lost hope for their marriage and are right on the edge of breaking up come here to discover hope and get healthy and reconciliation. Where their kids are taught values in a society that has robbed kids of any sense of right or wrong or absolutes. In a world of moral confusion and myopia, that this would be a place where kids could learn values and discover the author of values, the Lord Jesus Christ. A church that actually does something for homeless people, not just people who are like us who are middle class. A church that plants churches among unreached people groups. A church that prays for and sees the sick healed.

I want to be part of a church that is doing it all. I don't see why we can't have that. Why do we have to become fixated on one model of church? Every model is inadequate. Because the creation of the church by Jesus Christ was an infinitely great creation.

So this morning I am not going to give you the complete picture, the whole kaleidoscope. There are simply too many images of the church in the New Testament. But we are going to look at a few of them in a passage in 1 Corinthians 3 in a message that I have titled, "What is the Church?" Let's pray.

What is the church? Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:5,

"What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who

waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers, you are God's field, God's building. By the grace of 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. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple."

Now in the kaleidoscope of images the New Testament has for the church, Paul gives us three pictures or images in this passage. He says, "You are God's field. God's garden." That is what vv. 5-9 is about, being God's field, God's garden. The picture of the garden is one of growth.

The second image is God's building. In vv. 10-15 Paul speaks of building and laying a foundation using certain materials.

And then in vv. 16-17 Paul speaks of God's temple.

And what we are going to find out as we look at God's garden, God's building and God's temple is that these three pictures give us three of the **most essential**

functions or activities of the church. God's garden speaks to us about *evangelism*, reaching out to the unsaved world. God's building speaks to us about *edification*, the church being strengthened and growing up into maturity. And God's temple speaks to us about *exaltation*, the worship of God.

Evangelism, edification, exaltation. We are talking about mission to the world. We are talking about maturing believers. We are talking about the magnifying of God in worship.

What is the church? Well, it is God's garden, God's growing place. As we consider what it means to be God's growing place, I want you to look at the way this passage is structured. It says in v. 6 that God made it grow. And then in v. 7, again, but only God makes things grow.

What makes the church unique? As you think of the word church and you are doing free association in your mind, the first word that should come to your mind is God. Church = God. Not church = building; church = pew; church = choir; church = lady—but church = God. What makes the church unique; the special thing about church, what sets the church apart from every other merely human organization is God. Just God.

See, the church is not particularly special when it comes to our abilities to organize things. We joke around here about being a smoothly oiled machine. I get up to speak and I am constantly tapping my microphone and saying, "Is the sound right?" Someone joked with me the other day and said, "They will probably be doing that at your funeral. You will be lying in the casket and the first words will be, 'Is the sound right. Does this sound OK to you?'" There are lots of businesses, I can assure

you, that are better organized than the church. At least, I hope it is the case that the people who build atomic bombs and bridges are more tightly organized than we are.

Church isn't unique because we are better organized. It is not special because we are better financed. There are lots of companies that are better financed than the church. Someone did a satire a number of years ago about Microsoft buying the Vatican. We are not unique in our ability to raise money or even in our ability to teach or counsel.

What sets the church apart is God. It is not what human beings do or how we relate. It is not how big the crowd is. It is God. If you eliminate from your thinking God, you misunderstand the nature of the church.

That is why the secular analysis of the church is often so ludicrous. If you listen to newscasters talking about the church, whether it is the church preparing for the Pope's visit in the United States or the Southern Baptists as they meet for a convention and all the categories that the press use are entirely secular categories. So they will explore the church in terms of politics and conflict in the church between conservative and liberal. Or they will explore the church in terms of human traditions – the traditionalists verses the progressives.

But the media doesn't get it at all. And many people who attend church don't get it at all. What sets the church apart from every place else is God.

You know, it is often said that the only thing about love that's really worth having is the part you can't define. You can carve up love in a million ways, but the only part that is worth having is the part that you can't define.

To give you another picture, veterinary students can take a dog in vet school and dissect it. And they can learn about the dog's digestive system and examine the dog's liver and weigh it. They can examine the dog's kidneys. And they can learn about all the neurological pathways and the dog's body. A veterinary student can take cells from the dog's lungs and look at them under a microscope. But what a veterinary student can't completely capture is the very thing that makes the dog so nice to have around the house and why children love to play with dogs. The reason why anyone would want to own a dog – the veterinary student can't capture the life of the dog.

The only reason to have church; to do church; to be a church, is because the life of God is there. Yes, it is possible to find God through nature. People talk about communing with God as they walk through the woods or as they see a beautiful summer sunset. The Bible does say that the heavens declare the glory of God. But there is no place in the universe more associated with God than the church. And when the church itself loses its reason for existing, to carry the presence of God to the world, when the church becomes simply a human organization, just a gigantic bureaucracy and runs systems and does religious rituals, then it is like a dead dog being examined on a lab table. When we lose God, we lose what makes us beautiful and worth being connected to.

Listen; there is a hunger for God sweeping the Western world. A yearning for the supernatural life of God. I talked about it through the series I did in the book of Acts over the summer. Go into any bookstore, as I do almost every week, spiritual titles fill the shelves. Exploration of spiritual matters dominates the movies.

Spirituality is the hot topic in management seminars. The age of science is over in terms of it being the dominant power in controlling people's thoughts about life.

People are tired of being reduced to machines, to being treated like a computer. People are looking for life. Whether they know it or not, they are looking for God. And whether you know it or not, some of you are looking for God.

Listen; there is a hole in our hearts that cannot be filled by anything other than God. And there is one given that I have as I look out at the world. Every single person I see has a hole in his or her heart that can't be filled by anything other than God. It doesn't matter how secure that person is; how wealthy they are; how large their law practice is; how successful they are in business or how many degrees they have next to their name.

The great philosopher, Pascal, was right when he said that inside of every one of us is a God-shaped void. And the western world has come to a place of saying that all of the toys and all of our sexual exploration and all of our philosophies and causes, liberation movements, and all the relationships we enter and our new lovers – all of it put together can't fill the hole in our soul that only God can fill.

And you know, even when you have tasted of the goodness of God, I speak to many of you who are here in the church now, even when you have tasted the goodness of God, very often you are led astray, away from the banqueting table. And you try to fill the hole inside of you with some scraps and garbage that the culture leaves on the floor. Why do you eat bread that won't satisfy you or drink from the mud puddle of addictive behaviors rather than drink from the fountain of life that can satisfy your thirst forever?

What makes the church unique is that in the church people can find the fountain of life and put their cups under and drink. In the church they can find the bread of life, Jesus, himself, and feed on him and get satisfied.

Word association time: Church=God.

So as we consider the various images of church whether we are talking about God's garden, building or God's temple, the focus of attention is always on the God who supplies the energy for the church to fulfill its various functions. Evangelism, edification, exaltation – only God. The life of God. We have to get first things first. We have to place the organism, what is living, in front of the organization.

John Wimber, who was the founder of the Vineyard Association, and who passed away a couple of years ago, put it real well when he talked about organism having to lead organization. He said you have to get the horse in front of the cart. The problem with many churches is that sometimes the cart of organization comes before the horse. Or we put the horse in the cart. Or the cart on top of the horse. In so many churches you have the problem of institutionalism, where the church becomes so locked up by the hierarchy and a focus on rules and regulations and committees and boards and voting.

I get these different pastors journals and every once in a while what I read in them makes me queasy because I think, "Where is the church God?" I want to read to you an excerpt from a recent article concerning something so simple as the changing of the name of a church. Here is what it said,

"In the spring of 1992, the church board and I decided to make a more specific proposal that we meet on June 27 and vote to change the name of the church to City

Center Blank. A letter calling for the meeting gave the rationale that Full Gospel Tabernacle needed explanation, but City Center Blank described us better. Since we were that kind of church meeting in this particular city. At the start of the meeting, we proposed to broaden this title to City Center Church, subtitled this particular denomination. After a full and pleasant discussion, the vote came in with only 52% favoring the proposed name. My assessment was that we were open to change but didn't feel enough ownership or affection for the new one proposed. Someone moved that a committee composed of some board members, plus others representing various ages or interest screen possible names and offer the best possible choices at the annual meeting in February. This passed easily. Our board appointed a woman in her 20's, a retired woman, and a businessman to join the three board members. Throughout the fall they talked with groups and individuals.

In January 1993, they presented the leading six names in a letter asking each person to indicate their first and second preference. We published the top picks before the annual meeting. Four ballots into the voting two names emerged, but neither had garnered the necessary two-thirds majority. The notion came to table. We held another meeting six months later on a voice vote. The congregation sounded evenly divided. Another motion was offered to table the discussion of the new name. But the motion was defeated because the majority wanted a decision."

He goes on and talks about subsequent votes and how they finally got their new name. It was the most exhausting process you have ever heard of in your life for something as simple as a name change.

God loves that church. But there is something about the voice votes, the motions, the committees and the boards that leave me cold. Where in all of this, for heaven's sake, is God. Where is the fountain of life that people are looking for to satisfy, to quench their thirst? Where is that supernatural encounter that changes us?

So Paul says the church is God's field. The kind of field that Paul has in mind in v. 9 is a cultivated field. The word literally means a cultivated field or a farm. In the city, I don't think we have an understanding of the purpose of cultivating a field. I used to have a large garden in my backyard. Every year I would carefully dig it up and rototill and grass clip it. In April and May I would be planting the seeds – all the different kinds of plants, tomato plants, pepper plants. But I had no real aim at a harvest. So in June and July like most city farmers, the plants became overrun with weeds. In August the bugs would invade. And in September whatever the bugs and weeds didn't kill, I would share with the rabbits. But the truth was, I really didn't care about what was happening to my little garden because my family's survival didn't depend on whether we had two bags of tomatoes or one bag or what happened with my peppers or cucumbers or broccoli. It was just no big deal to me. And most vegetable gardeners in the city are just playing games. Gardening gives us something to do. It is a hobby.

But you see Jesus' purpose in cultivating his field called the church is to get a harvest. He is not just engaged in a hobby. Saving people, which is the whole field metaphor, it is all about evangelism and growth, saving people is not a hobby for

Jesus. Jesus said, “The Son of Man came into the world to seek and to save that which is lost.”

Let me put it to you this way and bring this really down to earth. Jesus didn’t come into the world and have nails pounded into his hands and feet and have a spear driven into his side in order to create churches that run a bunch of programs or hold a bunch of committee meetings or decide about names changes through multiple voice votes and tabling amendments and Roberts Rules of Order. Jesus came into the world literally to rescue people from destroying themselves and from ultimately going to hell. He wants a harvest.

And any church that wants to be Jesus’ people is going to be passionately interested in this task of evangelism. Not as a hobby or a sideline or something we do like golf. But evangelism is going to be the bread and butter of the church, our lifeblood, because we are God’s field, God’s growing place.

There is an interesting paradox, if you will, in what Paul is saying in v. 7. He says, “Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow.” And he also says, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered, but God made it grow.” We all know that unless the seed is alive, unless the miracle of life is in the seed, it doesn’t matter what we do, the seed won’t grow. You can’t grow a rock or a pebble or a Styrofoam cup. There has to be this life that only God can produce.

But we also know that without the planting and watering, there would also be nothing. People need to be involved in the process. The process of growing up a church, God’s field, is a partnership. And you really see this idea of partnership between God and us when Paul says in v. 9, “We are God’s fellow workers.” We

sometimes neglect in our focus on what God alone does. The truth that we also, everyone of you who are followers of Jesus, who have stepped over that line and have received Christ into your life, surrendering yourself to his Lordship, we also are part of a process of growing the church.

I love the old story of the Irishman who takes a friend out to the garden that he has planted. The friend is going on and on and on about all the wonderful things that God has done. His friend says, "Look at the flowers that God made. And look at the way God created those bushes. And look at these fruit trees that God made." Finally, the Irish farmer gets frustrated and says, "Well, you know, I had something to do with this too. I mean, you should have seen the place when God had it all to himself."

There is a distortion of teaching, what you might call a hyper-Calvinism, which creates a passivity communicating that we as human beings don't need to do anything to make a church grow. Church is going to grow when God says it is going to grow. We need to ease up and let God do the whole thing. If that is your perspective, and that is what you have been taught – that God is going to save people whatever we do, that is entirely false. It is damaging not only to the growth of the church, but also to the growth in your own life. Whether we are talking about intellectual growth or the growth of your mind, or if you are married, the growth in your marriage, the growth in your family, the growth of your business, the growth of your bank account, your growth in Christ – biblically, growth is always a partnership between God and us. The only thing that grows automatically is our waistlines. And I think we have something to do with that too.

Your salvation is something that God alone does. Salvation is entirely according to the Bible the miracle of God. The only thing we bring to salvation is our sin, which needs to be forgiven and our guilt cleansed by the grace and forgiveness of God. We bring nothing to the table of salvation other than our sins. Salvation, your justification is entirely a work of God and his grace. But growth in whatever area you think about, growth is a partnership.

This point is so important. I want you to see this with me. Flip with me to 2 Peter 1 so you can see how it is and why it is that the church grows and why you grow. It is a matter of being a partner with God. It is part of being God's fellow workers. Here is what Peter says in 2 Peter 1:3,

"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who calls us by his own glory and goodness."

You say, "Look at that, Rich. Because God is so good he has given us everything we need to live life and to grow in godliness, to grow in baring that image of Christ."

Then Peter goes on and gets to the point again. He says, "Through these he has given us very great and precious promises so that through them you might participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption that is in the world caused by evil desires."

You say, "Rich, we have all these promises of God. We have all the power. It is all God."

Let's read on, because in v. 5 Peter says, "Yes, you can have all the promises and power of God at your disposal, but for this very reason make effort to add to your faith goodness; to goodness knowledge; to knowledge, self control; to self control,

perseverance; if you possess these qualities in an increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge. But if you don't have them, you are nearsighted and blind."

Listen to these words in v. 5, "Make every effort..." In other words you can have all the promises of God, loads of promises stacked one on top of another, promises of peace, God's favor, healing, provision and protection. You can have all the power of the Holy Spirit in the world. But if you don't apply the promises, lay hold of the power, if you don't give yourself with diligence to the work of growth in any area you want to name, the growth of your marriage, the growth of your self, your bank account, the church, it is not going to happen. Growth isn't automatic. It is not given.

I used to imagine that you could tape lectures at school and put the tape player next to your bed at night and right before you go to bed at night, push the 'on' button, hearing the material as I slept and it would just sublimely get into my mind. I just wish that could be the case. That you could just have a knowledge injection or a spiritual injection. No fuss, no muss, just take one of these injections and you would become spiritual. No more temper. No more relational problems. No more struggle with self-control in any area.

But it doesn't work that way does it? The truth is that to grow we need to lean in. It is hard to overcome a bad habit. You really have to press in. Having a good marriage is hard work. It is not the fantasies of movies and the magazines. Don't let that deceive you. It is hard work to really communicate with another human being. To really understand what it is they are trying to say. To be a good listener. To yield your will.

And it takes work to grow as a Christian. You have to lean in. If you aren't part of a small group, what are you waiting for, a bolt of lightening to come out of the sky and strike you in the head before you say, "You know, I am not just going to sit in the crowd on Sunday morning. I am going to get personally involved with some other Christians and grow relationally and as a Christian." How long will some of you sit on the sidelines watching everyone else grow as Christians other than you? When are you going to lean in? When will you put away your causes of busyness and shyness and bad past experiences and lean in? If you and your spouse need marital counseling, get it. We have professional counselors on our staff here. Set an appointment. If you have a life controlling habit that needs to be broken, lean in and say, "Enough already. I am tired of drinking from the mud puddle. I want to start drinking from the fountain of life and really quench my thirst."

The truth is we are not going to see any harvest in terms of salvations in our families – with our parents, kids, in our friendship circles, in our workplace, in our school. We are not going to see any salvations unless we lean in. It is through the gospel we share that God saves people. There is no other way. Unless we make every effort in prayer, in sharing, because the only thing I have ever seen that grows by itself in the garden is weeds. And if we are not growing forward and if at this moment you aren't growing forward spiritually, you are probably losing ground. The stream of tendency is against us as Christians. We Christians are salmon and are constantly swimming up stream against the tide of the culture, the tide of our own sinful tendencies. The church is God's field.

And then Paul speaks of the church using a second image of God's building in v. 10. We are God's fellow workers, God's field and God's building. "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, for no one can lay any other foundation but the one that is laid which is Jesus Christ."

Now if God's field spoke to us about evangelism, God's building speaks, I believe about edification, about the maturing of the church. It is about the building of our internal strength.

There are several ways to grow. We can grow out, but we also can grow up. And some churches are so focused on growing out that the church is never growing up. They have an enormous crowd of babies, spiritual babies. You have a church that is getting larger and larger, but is staying the same age. It is like having a 300 pound 2-year old. You have a 300 pound 2-year old on your hands and you have a problem. I want my bottle and I want it now. Some churches are just gigantic nurseries with a few exhausted teachers.

Jesus doesn't just want a nursery with lots and lots of people, he wants those babies to grow. He is interested in building a church he says in Matthew 16, a church that will prevail even against the gates of hell. A church that will never be destroyed.

How do we know whether we are building here in VCF Columbus or in the church you attend regularly? How do you know if you are building in the direction that Jesus wants you to build?

Well, the first thing we need to do, of course, is have the right foundation to build on. Paul speaks of laying a foundation and he says in v. 11, “No one can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

We need to stop there and meditate on what he is saying. He is saying, first of all, that the foundation of a church that is going to be healthy, a church that will grow in the right direction, a church where the presence of God will remain the foundation of that church needs to be Jesus Christ, a person. And you can miss an important point here. He doesn't say the foundation is principles of Christ, or having the right doctrines about Christ. He says the foundation of a life-giving healthy church is Jesus Christ, a person.

And I think this is where a lot of churches get off. A church can easily communicate so long as the church members can recite correct statements about Jesus; everything is OK in the church. Even though people in the church are not in a living relationship with the person of Christ. A person can easily communicate that as long as the people in the church appear to be living a moral life as defined to a set of four or five external behaviors. As long as everyone in the church conforms to these moral habits, everyone is OK, even though a lot of members in the church don't appear to be in a living relationship with the person Jesus Christ. Just follow this recipe; do these 17 things and you will live a good Christian life.

But that is not the foundation Paul was talking about. He was not talking about a recipe or a set of rules to follow. He is talking about a living relationship with a living person. It is not principles here that he is talking about. He is talking about a

person. Jesus said this, he said, "I am the way, the truth, the life." The way, the truth, the life is personal. It is not impersonal rules and regulations.

This is true in building a church and in building a family; building your life. If you want to build a good marriage, you need to be in relationship with Jesus. And if you and your spouse are having problems, let me tell you what I would suggest. First of all, you say to each other, "You know, we may have communication difficulties, we may have problems resolving conflicts; we have problems with our pasts and all the dysfunction we grew up in and the hurt, abuse and neglect. But before we tally up all our problems, both of us, the most important thing we can do in getting our marriage off dead center is for both of us to have a living relationship with Jesus Christ. So why don't we take 15 minutes a day to pray together and invite Jesus Christ to be the center of our home, having our lives revolve around him and in knowing that he is the source of our lives and our love together.

The truth is, we can't make it maritally, relationally with our boyfriend or girlfriend, with our roommates without Jesus. We don't have enough love. We don't have enough forgiveness. We don't have what it takes. We need Christ in our marriages. We need Christ in our homes.

You have to have the right foundation. Paul says, "There is a foundation laid for the church." He says, "No one can lay a foundation other than the one which is already laid, which is Jesus Christ." What this means is the building site for the church is already occupied. Jesus is not going to share the building site with someone else. Not Mohammed or Buddha or some other great religious teacher. Not with the apostle Peter, Martin Luther or John Calvin, you or me.

This was a crucial point regarding the Corinthian church, who loved to follow men and for us who follow this Corinthian tendency of identifying with this teacher and that church and that denomination. Jesus Christ is the unique and only foundation for the church. As Peter said in Acts 4, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Paul writes in 1 Timothy, "There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."

And it is not just other people that Jesus Christ displaces. It is other programs, other ways of getting ourselves right with God. Jesus Christ and him crucified already occupy the foundation site. You don't squeeze onto the foundation site the Eucharist or confession or knocking on doors or water baptism. You don't squeeze onto the foundation site our own good works, our own attempts to being good, our own gifts, and our own personal rules for cleaning up our own lives – all things that we human beings contribute.

You can always tell a church that has put something onto their foundation site, something other than Jesus Christ and him crucified because it is going to be filled with a lot of anxious, nervous, guilty people – a lot of people who are more compulsively trying to get right with God. You find a church where people are covering up their sin and living in the shadows, a church that is living on something other than Jesus Christ and him crucified, it will very often be a church filled with very self-righteous people. People who judge others and other churches. People who think they are better than and more holy than.

But a church that is built on Jesus Christ and him crucified, salvation through faith alone, is going to be a church characterized by peace. “Therefore, being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” There is not going to be a lot of striving, a lot of anxious doing, and a lot of nervous activity. There will be an overriding peace that characterizes the church.

The church that is built on a living relationship with Christ will be a church characterized by freedom. Not freedom to do our own thing, but freedom from guilt, from running around trying to prove that we are something; freedom from being religious; from pretense. Freedom to be ourselves. Freedom from having to be churchy and artificial.

If we choose the right foundation, we also have to recognize that the foundation must be built upon. In v. 10 Paul writes, “I laid a foundation as an expert builder and someone else is building upon it.” In v. 12 Paul says, “If any man builds on this foundation...” Paul recognized that the work was simply done by laying a foundation; a building is going up.

You know, in the modern world it is easy to be overwhelmed by the insignificance of our own lives and our own existences. There are over 6 billion people in the world. Wherever we go in urban America, we are in crowds. If you go to OSU you stand in lines to register for classes. And especially as a freshman you are in classes with 500-600 fellow students. You go to the Shoe and there is 95,000 other people screaming. Drive along the northern part of the outerbelt and you are in traffic jams. It is easy to say, “What is my life worth? What is my significance in light of all of this?”

We could say, “Well, I am just doing my little bit, my little corner of the block is a little happier. My family is doing a little better because of my efforts. I am running around doing random acts of kindness.”

But I tell you, that is not enough for me to give my life meaning. Then I think about the church and I think from the time of the apostles, great men and women, the best people the world has known, have been building on this foundation. They have been adding their efforts and their strength and their prayers and sometimes their blood to this great building task. I think of people like John Wesley and Mother Theresa and John Wimber and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A host of people building on this foundation over the last 20 centuries and I think by the grace of God, you and I are privileged to take part in this building project.

There are other things we could build. We could build up big bank accounts and build our stock portfolios. We could build trustfunds for our kids and our grandkids add nausea. We could build our own reputations, our own careers. Or we can contribute to the greatest building project ever undertaken the in history of the universe – the building of the church of Jesus Christ.

Do you know the medieval Cathedrals in Europe, especially some of the ones in France and Germany, took centuries, some of them took 400-500 years to complete. The people who laid the foundations would die or retire before another group of people would take up the process of building the lower stories. Generations of people would lend their hands to the construction of the Cathedral. They felt themselves caught up in a purpose that was so much bigger than any one life or one

generation. The building outside that is going up is not a tribute to one person or a small group of people. It took a church to build it!

And that is what we are called to. The building of the church of Jesus Christ. Our lives can have significance, however messed up you are, however flawed and dysfunctional and psychologically off you are. Whatever mistakes you have made in marriage and in bed and in school and in the workplace, your life can have real meaning and real significance because you could get caught up in this 2000-year-old task that is so much bigger than you. A work that has occupied the best men and women that this world has ever known.

I have a reason for living. With all my flaws and all my mistakes, I am giving myself to building the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. And at the end of my life, if I continue like this, will you do it with me? We can at least look back and say, “We helped to build the church.” Not using the shoddy materials of some secular management technique or what some other church is doing that is really popular and hot. But using the best materials that God has to offer – the materials of God’s Word and prayer and relationship and tears with each other and words of encouragement and thanksgiving. And times spent in effort and money and commitment and love. If nothing else works in my life, I have found something to give myself to and I invite you into it, the building of the church of Jesus Christ. Let’s pray.