

4 Week Series

Week 1: Building the Church

1 Corinthians 14:1-12

Today we begin a series on life in the church. In this series, we will be exploring what it means to belong to this incredible institution, which can be for us the body of Christ in a very real way. We understand that Christ is the foundation upon which we build the church, but what does it take to build the church? What kind of community is it we are establishing? What difference does church membership make in our lives? Finally, what does it mean to belong to the body of Christ? These are questions we will be addressing together as we consider our common life in the church.

Many times when I perform in a wedding, I am asked to read 1 Corinthians 13. It is a beautiful passage on love, and it extols the power of love in a covenant relationship. What many people do not realize, however, is that 1 Corinthians 13 is nestled into a much larger section of scripture that has to do with spiritual gifts that are used to build up the church. Among these gifts we find faith, hope, and love (the greatest of them, of course, being self-giving love).

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes for us what spiritual gifts are all about. Here is where we learn about gifts of teaching, healing, prophecy, and speaking in and interpreting other tongues. There are other gifts also, and Paul tells us that people possessing those gifts are all important. No person possesses a gift so great that that person can go solo without the need of other people possessing other gifts.

In the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, we hear about this gift of love that is foundational to the building of a community of so many people with so many diverse gifts. Then in the fourteenth chapter, Paul addresses a critical issue facing the Corinthian church. There were many people in the church in Corinth who had the gift of glossolalia, that is, the gift of speaking in tongues. Many of these people had decided that their gift, being more mystical in nature, was a greater gift than any other spiritual gifts. Some considered themselves better Christians with a higher calling than anyone else around them. Paul realized immediately that this smug, elite attitude was only destructive and could, in no way, build up the church. Paul's words are aimed at helping us understand the one fundamental truth about any and all spiritual gifts: the only valuable gift is the gift that builds up.

In my ministry, I have had the opportunity to be part of two major construction projects for churches I have served. In the time of planning and building, there are many choices to make. There are many things to be considered, and there are just as many opportunities to get sidetracked as there are to stay focused. I learned early in my ministry, whether constructing a building or planning a Bible study, to stop and reflect along the way and ask myself the question, "How is this going to help in the building of God's kingdom?" It is not unlike Dr. Zan Holmes, who, in my preaching class following each sermon, would make us answer the question, "So what?" What difference does it make? How does it build the kingdom?

There are many things that I think are important. There are many gifts that I have been given as a child of God, and if my guess is correct, every one of you is blessed with some special gift (or gifts) because you, too, are children of God. As we consider our life in the church, however, we are challenged to determine which of our gifts are more likely to build up the church and which of those are not. I know many ministers who are excellent golfers, and although I am certain that some of those ministers use their golf game to cultivate significant relationships, or even perhaps provide

pastoral care or spend time discussing faith, most golfers I know simply use their golf skills as an outlet for fun. I am confident that God is not opposed to fun and fellowship on the golf course; however, I will not presume that any gifts I have for golf or any other sport can build up the church effectively. I also have been given the gifts of pastoral leadership, and those are the gifts that I consider will build the church more effectively than my golf game.

When I was a young boy, I remember spending time with my grandparents on their farm. I would spend my days playing around the farm, but what I really loved was spending time with my grandfather in his workshop. One day I was in the middle of a game of make-believe, and I was speaking to some imaginary person. My grandfather stopped what he was doing and asked what I said (presuming that I had spoken to him). When I told him that I was talking to no one, he replied, "Oh, you were just talking to the wind." I never knew that my grandfather was such a great biblical scholar, for that is exactly what Paul is explaining to the Corinthians. He explains that people who speak in tongues that cannot be interpreted or are otherwise unintelligible are just "speaking into the air" (1 Corinthians 14:9) or, as my grandfather put it, "just talking to the wind."

Consequently, the challenge for us as followers of Christ is to reflect upon the gifts we have received and to offer a true assessment of those gifts to determine which of them can most effectively build up the church. Then we are challenged to offer those gifts to the body of Christ, the church, that the church might be strong and that the work of Christ might be fulfilled.

Week 2: The New Community

Acts 6:1-6

I was still in seminary, and I was serving as pastor in a small community. Following my first worship service, I was standing at the door greeting people, and I was so proud that I had finally arrived. I finally had my own pulpit. As I greeted the people, I felt someone tug on the sleeve of my robe. I turned to find a little girl, who was all of eight years old, anxiously trying to get my attention. I asked her what was wrong, and she told me that the upstairs toilet was running and would not stop. I told her that we would need to find someone to repair it, and in one of my more humbling experiences in ministry, she said, "No, my mom said that that's your job. You have to fix it." It was a long time before I moved from repairing toilets to providing the kind of pastoral leadership that empowered the trustees of the church to handle the toilets.

In the early days of the church, the apostles had to make that same kind of decision. One of the wonderful gifts that came to the church from our Jewish ancestry was the gift of caring for the poor, especially the women who were widowed. It was not difficult for the apostles and all other followers of Jesus to become involved in these critical ministries of justice and peace. The problem, however, was that the Jewish followers were taking care of one another like they always had. Those who were poor and widowed were provided daily rations of food, and the apostles were right in the middle of the serving line along with everyone else. The Hellenists, however, had widows (and probably others who were poor) who were going without the daily food ration simply because the Hellenists were not organized to care for them like the Jewish followers.

The twelve apostles called together the whole community and began to organize them for ministry. In the process, they created the church's first ministry team. These were people who were set apart to organize this fractious band of believers into a new community designed to care for the least. Theirs was the task of cataloging the needs within the community and then organizing the community to meet those needs. The Greek word for this kind of servant ministry is diakonos, from which we get our words "deacon" and "diaconal."

As we consider our life in the church, it is important to remember that the church's entire ministry is founded upon servant ministry. The new community of faith is created only when we dedicate ourselves and organize ourselves for ministry with the poor, with those who are lost, with those who are suffering, and with those who are hopeless. Seven deacons were set apart to lead in that

ministry.

The text tells us that the apostles themselves were then set apart for a different type of ministry. They devoted themselves “to prayer and to serving the word.” As in most organizational structures, it may well appear that the apostles were moving up to something easier while they left the hard work for the deacons. Before we speak too harshly of the apostles, however, let us understand just how difficult the task of prayer and serving the word really are. As most people involved in upper management of any organization will attest, the job usually appears much easier than it really is.

As a young boy, I can remember hearing a preacher tell the story of a circuit rider who came across a farmer escaping the hot summer sun while resting under a tree. The circuit rider began with small talk, and he asked the farmer how his farming was going. The farmer looked up at the circuit rider, and he said, “I just wish I had it as easy as you. Here I am slaving away in the summer sun, but all you have to do is preach and pray.”

The circuit rider assured the farmer that the business of the circuit rider was quite challenging. There were many things besides preaching and praying for which he was responsible. In addition, he informed the farmer that preaching and praying were themselves difficult tasks. The farmer replied, “Well, I don’t know much about preaching, but I know I can pray without any problem.”

The circuit rider offered a challenge. “When I ride from town to town, I spend much of my time completely in prayer. Sometimes that means I have to focus for one to two hours at a time praying without ceasing. If you can pray without ceasing for just five minutes, I’ll give you my horse.” The farmer stood up with a huge grin on his face. “You’re on,” he said. With that, he knelt down and started to pray. The circuit rider glanced at his pocket watch. Thirty seconds passed . . . then sixty. About a minute and a half into the prayer, the farmer looked up from where he knelt and asked, “Say, Preacher, does the saddle come with that horse?”

The apostles’ task of praying and serving the word is not as easy as we are prone to believe. What the apostles tell us through their words and actions is that, whereas servant ministry is foundational in the new community, prayer and preaching are vitally important to sustaining such servant ministry. The challenge for us as disciples of Jesus Christ is to organize ourselves for servant ministry that is sustained by earnest prayer and diligent preaching.

Many churches today are discovering such vital ministries. The people of God are rediscovering that mission and outreach empowered by prayer and proclamation are the essential elements of the new community of faith. May God empower your life in the church to reflect the life of Jesus.

Week 3: From Magic to Miracles

Acts 8:4-13

I grew up loving and believing in magic. As a child, I watched the television series *Bewitched* with the hope that it was true that perhaps I was a warlock whose time had just not yet come. Even as an adult, I was captured by the charm of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books and movies. There is just something within many of us that wants us to believe that there is something “real” about this magic; however, at some point in our lives, we finally come to that place where we must distinguish between fact and fiction.

As wonderful as science is for our world, I am convinced that, deep within us, we want to think that we really do not have everything figured out. We want to know that there is something beyond ourselves that cannot be explained. We want to know that there is something greater than a formula, and we want to know that there is more to life than can be defined in scientific or mathematical terms. In short, we believe in magic because we need to know for sure that life is more than just the day-to-day drudgery it can become and that death really isn’t the final word in this life.

In the story in Acts, Philip has gone to the region known as Samaria to proclaim the good news of

Jesus Christ to any who would listen. Samaria, as you may recall, is the home of the Samaritans, an “impure” race of people descended from Jews who had married outside of Judaism. In many ways they worshiped as the Jews; however, their worship had developed apart from Jewish worship because they were unwelcome in Jewish life. It is in this setting that Simon the Magician is practicing his art. His magic is spellbinding, and he is considered to be the “power of God that is called Great.” We do not know what kind of magic he practiced or what tricks he did. We just know that he was someone who captivated the people’s attention.

The story tells us that Philip came proclaiming the good news and that people began to listen to him and turn away from Simon the Magician. Simon himself turned to see what message Philip brought, and it wasn’t long before he became a believer himself. Then the story tells us that Simon “stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.” Simon had moved from magic to miracles. He had gone from practicing illusions to practicing faith.

Many people are content with practicing magic, but life in the church means that we must learn to practice faith. In my childhood love of magic, I often used the words hocus pocus when conjuring up my pretend magic spells. I was amused as an adult to discover that hocus pocus might actually be an aberration of the Latin Mass. When the priest would offer the words of institution, he would say, “*Hoc est enim corpus meum*” (This is my body). The majority of people from the medieval period forward did not speak Latin, so they came up with words that sounded like what they heard. It was commonly assumed that the moment of the magical transubstantiation of the elements into the true body and blood of Christ happened at the moment that the priest said the “hocus pocus.” The term refers, then, to the moment that the host and the wine become body and blood.

There are many times in my ministry when I have wished for the right incantation to make things happen. Whether in worship or the hospital room or committee meetings, I have often wished I could just chant some magic words that would make everything happen the right way. Unfortunately, the magic words never seemed to work. Ultimately, I had to learn to rely on God to work the miracles instead of relying on myself to work the magic.

Throughout my life, I have found that magic doesn’t require much of me. It is merely entertaining and amusing. Magic is pretty much an end in itself. Miracles, however, point to something beyond themselves. I remember a college professor who ingrained in my brain that miracles are signs of the “inbreaking” kingdom of God. They point beyond themselves to God, who is in our midst. They are signs that God is here, and it is God’s presence that invites us to respond in faith.

As a young associate pastor, I was discussing miracles with one of my mentors, the late Dr. Erwin Bohmfalk, who was known to many people only as “Bummie.” Bummie and I were discussing the feeding of the multitudes, and I was really stuck on the idea that it wasn’t a miracle unless the five loaves and two fish magically multiplied until there were twelve baskets full after everyone had eaten. Bummie challenged my thinking and said, “Perhaps they miraculously multiplied, as you say, but what would you think if people really had food with them? Then suppose that when it came time for dinner, Jesus asked who had food, and no one was willing to share. Now suppose that the little boy who gave everything inspired the people to do likewise. Then after the covered-dish feast was finished, there was plenty left over.”

I was astounded. That would be no miracle at all. “Then you’re saying it wasn’t a miracle,” I said. Bummie replied, “To me, it’s pretty miraculous when selfish people are inspired to share. What do you think?” I had been looking for magic, and Bummie showed me a miracle.

Life in the church is a journey from magic to miracles. If you dare follow Jesus, then the miracle of faith will be yours.

Week 4: The Peaceable Kingdom

Isaiah 11:6-9

Many churches operate with a master plan. The church I currently pastor has the potential of growing more than 120 percent during the next fifteen years, and we are making plans to meet the various challenges of a growing church. Our church has a master plan for our church buildings in a new location. We also have a master plan for our staff, and we are planning for the staff to grow accordingly to meet the growing needs of the church family. We have a master plan for our program by which we are ensuring that our program is appropriately structured to see us well into the future. Master planning is critical. It is a road map designed to take us where we want to go in the future, and it is a deliberate effort on our part to keep us on the path we believe God intends for us.

From the age of twelve, I have had a vision of what I wanted to do with my life. Although I could not see the details, I had discovered early in my life that my calling was to the ordained ministry, and I just knew that I was supposed to fulfill a vocation in the church. That vision for my life has served as a master plan for how I would structure my education and training. The vision had implications for my wife and me in our planning for a family; further, it had implications for almost every area of my personal life from vacations to days off to hobbies. Everything had to be oriented to the vision. I knew early on that my relationship with God was dynamic and that the master plan could be altered throughout the course of my life to meet changing circumstances. However, I have also discovered that simply ignoring that master plan is not wise and usually leads to trouble.

The prophet Isaiah presents a master plan. Isaiah's image of the peaceable kingdom is a great master plan for us. It is a vision for how life in the kingdom ought to be. For Christians, it is a vision of what life in the church ought to reflect. It is an ideal vision of peace, and it asks the question of just how this vision compares with reality.

Current reality suggests that we are a long way from realizing this vision. Wolves and leopards still eat small goats and lambs. Bears still think of cows as delectable entrées. It's still not a good idea to keep calves, lions, and small children in the same pen. Terrorists still want to destroy human life. Enemies continue to kill one another. Dictators torture their citizens. War never ceases. How can we even consider this vision of a peaceable kingdom when reality suggests that the kingdoms in which we live seem to have no chance for peace?

One would think that, as I've grown older, I would have given up on idealism. Common wisdom maintains that, when you've been smitten by life a few times and when you've been hurt in the real world, you will finally come to your senses and begin to live with the harsh realities of life. I've had some people tell me that my idealism is sometimes like hiding my head in the sand, that I was in denial, and that I wasn't paying attention to the realities that define our world.

Isaiah would tell us, however, that if we give up on the ideal, then we give up the hope that our reality will ever improve. Reality will just continue to bite harder and harder until it finally destroys us.

Life in the church means that we are challenged to take up this new life in the kingdom of God. It is a kingdom where all are welcome and where strife and war will cease. It is a kingdom where neither the color of our skin nor our gender nor the shape of our bodies or who we are politically or theologically will matter. It is a kingdom where we and those who despise us and those whom we despise will somehow find a way to sit down together in peace. It is a kingdom where no one is cast out or left to despair. It is a kingdom where hope abounds and where laughter and love are the order of the day. It is a kingdom that we pray to enter when life here is done, but there are fools like me who continue to believe that it is a kingdom that can happen right now—where we live today!

In our world, there are two distinct categories of social justice. One is retributive justice and the other is restorative justice. Retributive justice is setting the record straight through acts of retribution. It is "getting even." Restorative justice, however, does not permit us to focus our energy upon "getting even" and asks us to focus, instead, upon restoring everyone involved back to relationship with one another. Isaiah is concerned primarily with restoration. Isaiah has little concern here with retribution.

Let the kingdom of peace be the master plan by which we live in the church. When we are in conflict with one another; when we are dealing with terror and fear in our world and in our individual lives;

when we are put into the pen with the lion, the leopard, the wolf, and the bear; look around you and you will find a child.

This child is vaguely reminiscent of Jesus. This child is vulnerable and trusting. This child is full of hope and joy. This is the child who will show you what it means to live in perfect harmony even within those hostile surroundings. Follow the child, and you will discover a life of peace and joy awaiting you in the body of Christ. This is the life that God wills for us.

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