

“A New Reputation”

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The new reputation for Corinth is fragile; the Church of Jesus Christ is not.

1 Corinthians 3:1-11

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

A new calling

Today’s Scripture passage is the same text I used for my very first sermon from this pulpit. It was Wednesday, December 16, 1992. I was preaching what’s called a “trial sermon.” At the end of the evening there would be a vote on whether to call me as Pastor of Corinth. The outcome of the vote was far from certain. There had been active and vocal opposition against my candidacy, partly based on misinformation and also based on honest but deep differences in the congregation. The church profile said most of the congregation wanted a “conservative” pastor. Emphasis on *most* (not all).

What illustrates the tension in this room that night is that I was called on a 71% positive vote. Most pastors wouldn’t say yes to a call if they knew thirty percent of the people were against them from the start. I knew that the congregation was deeply divided about many issues; whether to call me as their pastor was only the most recent.

I was later told that my sermon introduction made the Search Committee very nervous. I told the 250 people gathered that evening that I thought the name “Corinth” was a strange one for a congregation. The reasons were two-fold. First, I noted that the city of Corinth in Greece famously boasted a pagan temple offering a thousand female prostitutes to service travelers through a busy commercial crossroads. In the first century, “Corinthian girl” was a euphemism for “prostitute” and “to corinthianize” was to practice sexual immorality. Awkward!

Second, the church established by Paul in Corinth was hardly a model church. After Paul founded the church, he was followed by Apollos, Peter, and probably others.

Word came to Paul that members of the church were bragging they had been baptized by one or another Christian leader. The Corinthian believers squabbled about their loyalties and about almost everything else from important truths like the resurrection to who was elbowing whom to get to the front of the line at their communion “love feast.”

In my sermon introduction that night I asked, “Why would someone name a church in Hickory after such a divided New Testament church?” The rest of my sermon challenged the congregation to “make a new reputation for the name Corinth.”

A quarter century later, the name “Corinth” has a new reputation in Hickory, North Carolina. If you think Pastor Bob the Builder did it, you need to hear the rest of this sermon.

A new insight

I’m going to attach the original manuscript from 1992 to the end of this one if you’d like to read it, but I decided not to repeat that exact sermon for two reasons. First, an anniversary is a different occasion than a call sermon. Second, my study of the text this week has given me some fresh insight into what Paul said and why.

Here’s the new insight: Paul uses two analogies for the church, and neither one of them is adequate by itself. In verse 9 he says, “You are God’s field; God’s building.” “Field” summarizes the preceding verses; “building” previews what follows. If Paul only compared the church to a field something would be lacking in his analogy. He more than compensates for that lack by using a “building,” but if he used only a “building” he would miss vital truths expressed in the “field.”

One could argue that both analogies were needed because Paul’s readers were probably a combination of rural people with open fields all around and city dwellers who drew the curtain to an urban skyline, but I think there’s more. We badly misunderstand the church if think of it only as a farm or only as a building. Together Paul’s two analogies are brilliant.

The problem (1-4). Both analogies address the same issue. Among all the problems Paul wanted to address in 1 Corinthians, this was primary. He confronted it first and deepest. It is the problem of conflict in the church – cliques, rivalry, jealousy, condescension. In an odd sort of way I’m glad the first century Corinthians had this problem; otherwise we probably would never have had 1 Corinthians 13.

Paul notes in verse 4 that some Corinthians say, “I follow Paul” while others say, “I follow Apollos.” Paul you probably know. Apollos less so, but Apollos is rather prominent in the New Testament. He was a Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, who was well-educated in Scripture was more eloquent and persuasive than Paul himself.

When he first believed in Christ, Apollos had heard only part of the story. But when Priscilla and Aquila instructed him further, he was responsive. After Paul established the church in Corinth, Apollos followed him. People loved Apollos, and Paul was fine with that. Knowing he could leave the church at Corinth in Apollos' hands was probably why Paul felt comfortable moving on after eighteen months. What Paul wasn't fine with was that the Corinthians divided into a Paul-clique and an Apollos-clique.

This party spirit prompts Paul to confront these Corinthians as "worldly" (1,3), "infants" (1), and "mere humans" (3,4). Paul seems to be addressing particularly those who prefer him over Apollos when he says, "I gave you milk, not solid food" (2). In other words, he started them out with first things, and Apollos took them to the next level. However, he says, "you are still not ready" for solid food. They need more milk.

Christians like to debate what Paul means by "milk" v. "solid food" and by "worldly" v. "spiritual" or "infants" v. mature. The most common understanding is that "milk" is about the first things of the Gospel, and "solid food" is about complex theology. I totally disagree. Paul tells us exactly what he means. The emphasis is on what you know v. what you do. If you think you understand the Gospel but it doesn't change the way you think of and treat others in the church, you're still a baby, still worldly. If you think you've grown spiritually too much to love well, get back in the crib.

"Grow up," he says to the Corinthians. Then he adds there are two very different ways to think about growing: field and building.

A field (5-9). To a church that has a tendency to overinflate human personalities, Paul finds multiple ways in his field analogy to downplay himself and Apollos, and himself more than Apollos. First, he doesn't ask, "Who is Apollos and who is Paul?" It's "*What* is Apollos and *what* is Paul?" In his analogy the people involved are things, comparable to plows and sickles. Note that he mentions Apollos first. He calls them both servants (5) assigned by the Master.

Chronologically Paul was first, so he planted and Apollos watered (6), but neither one "is anything" (7). What they do, they do with the same purpose (8), and they'll get the same reward (8). They are "co-workers in God's service" (9).

The point in all this, of course, is how absurd it is to attach importance to the planter or the waterer. Only God can make things grow" (7). Later in this letter Paul will talk about different roles in the church – gifts of the Holy Spirit, he calls them. Of course different people are variously called and gifted. Of course! But which one of them can turn a seed into a tomato, or an acorn into a tree. The humans involved really might as well be tools. If you're a farmer, would you say, "I prefer a plow" or "I prefer a sickle"? You prefer one for sowing; the other for reaping. Your little ones on the farm may say they only like one or the other; you as the farmer need both.

A building (10-11). Paul then abruptly shifts from “field” to “building.” Again, the focus is on God. “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder (10). He doesn’t mean, “Look at me; I’m so wise.” He means a wise builder knows to start with the foundation, and that’s what I did. It’s what Paul did everywhere he went, leaving for those who followed him the task of “building on it.”

Then he adds, “But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation (he means any *durable* foundation) than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (11). If we had time, we would go on to the next few verses, where Paul describes building material options as “gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw.” What a range! Obviously there’s much to be said about using durable material on the whole building. But none of that will matter unless there is a strong foundation.

Both field and building respond to the root problem of the Corinthian church. Their problem was not the pagan society around them. Their fundamental problem was not the lure of economic success in their thriving city. Their problem wasn’t Paul or Apollos or Peter. Their problem wasn’t even the other guy who wasn’t as grown up.

The presenting issue was division. The underlying problem was pride, ego, sin. Whose pride? Anyone’s pride who thought their loyalties or doctrines or morals or maturity made them better. To be sure, doctrines and morals matter. But they don’t matter as much as the foundation – Jesus Christ.

So why are both analogies important? Because if you have only the field analogy you certainly have a great point about mystery and humility, but you also think of the church as fragile. Any farmer or gardener knows there are no guarantees. This thing can fail at any time due to circumstances beyond your control. Success one year offers no guarantee for the next. Fields are fragile, vulnerable, and temporary.

That’s not the case with a building. A building is strong and stable. Then why not just go with a building as the analogy for the church? Because a building is something you take credit for. You can perfect your design and use great materials and twist your arm patting yourself on the back for what you did. The building is strong and stable and durable, but you think you did it on your own.

However, the building analogy is about the critical need for a foundation. There’s no stability to a beautiful building without a strong foundation.

A new vulnerability

I re-read that 1992 sermon and realize I was fairly bold for an outsider; cheeky, even. I quoted from Scott Peck’s *People of the Lie*, and told them self-deception is evil. Nothing like trying to get a new job and telling your potential employer, “There’s a fairly good chance some of you are evil.”

On one level, Linda and I didn't care how the vote went that night. We were happy where we were. In retrospect, we care a lot and feel so blessed to be here.

A quarter century ago I looked at a gathered congregation, mostly older than their 37-year-old pastoral candidate, and told them I thought the name Corinth had become prophetic. Whereas the first century Corinthians said, "I follow Paul," "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Peter," I told the 20th century Hickory Corinthians that they had divided themselves into cliques of Kilburnites, Sperryites, and Althousians – referring to my three immediate predecessors. I quoted a member of the church who had said to me during the interview process, "You know what the problem is with this church? Dr. Althouse died!"

I added, "Yes. Dr. Althouse died. His body was not intended to be immortal. And Rev. Sperry resigned, as did Rev. Kilburn. Their ministries here were temporal also. Mine will be limited, too, if I come your pastor."

At the time I had no idea I would serve more than 25 years. Now that I have, I think Corinth is as vulnerable as it was after Dr. Althouse died. If you were here in the late 1960s you probably remember that his retirement was forced prematurely, in his view, by his declining health. The congregation went from four decades of strength and growing influence to a new pastor and a chaotic phase in about a year, from what I've been told.

That story, I've since learned, pales in comparison to the story of the only other pastor who served Corinth longer than I have. Like Dr. Althouse, Dr. Joseph Murphy led in a grand building project to erect the finest cathedral Hickory had seen at the time. It was completed and occupied in 1911. Shortly after that, the nation plunged into World War I, and before it was over Dr. Murphy, 27 years into his pastorate, suffered a stroke and died almost instantaneously.

A sovereign God gives and takes away leaders. Corinth members in 1969 felt so insecure about their church after a beloved pastor died, they divided into factions to compete over their separate visions of what the church would do and be next. This is the human, sinful response to insecurity: I need to take control. It's spiritual infancy.

God was not worried about Corinth after World War I. He wasn't worried about Corinth in the 1970s. He wasn't worried about Corinth when there was a 71% vote to call Bob Thompson. And he won't be worried when he takes me out of the way, however and whenever that happens. The same for my brother Paul Cummings or anyone else in leadership here.

The new reputation we have built at Corinth is beautiful but fragile, like a garden. The Church of Jesus Christ is strong and secure, because it is built on a solid foundation. The common theme through the history of this church is Jesus Christ. I look through our records and find Jesus on every page, in every pastor.

I am certainly aware, having looked through the records of the past, that in 50 years if not before others will comb through what we leave behind in our generation. I pray that when they remember me, they will not say, "He organized things well" or "He preached good sermons" or "He could sure preach a funeral." I pray they will say, "In everything he did, he sure focused the spotlight on Jesus Christ." If that is true, the legacy will last, for no one can lay any other foundation. Amen.

“A New Reputation”

(I Corinthians 3:1-11)

Corinth Reformed United Church of Christ

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March 2, 2003

(This sermon was originally preached December 16, 1992,
on the night that Corinth Reformed UCC called Robert M. Thompson as pastor.)

Since my first contacts with this congregation, I have been puzzled about the name of this church. It's not your middle name, "Reformed," that concerns me; I know enough already not to raise that issue. Neither is it your last name, "United Church of Christ" that intrigues me.

It's the first name, "Corinth." I'm curious to know why, 123 years ago, someone thought "Corinth" would be a good name for a church. Apart from this church, I must say that the name "Corinth" does not have good connotations for me.

The city of Corinth is located on a narrow isthmus connecting southern Greece, known as the Peloponnesus, with the rest of Europe. In other words, Greece is like an hourglass, and Corinth is the small "waistline" in the middle. Without this isthmus, Peloponnesus would be an island in the Mediterranean Sea. Corinth, then, has always been an important city for land trade, on north-south routes, and for sea trade, on east-west routes, since it connects the Aegean Sea with the Ionian Sea.

Under the Roman empire, this commercial capital became known for something else. Traveling merchants with their crews were looking for sexual pleasures in their stopover points, and the Corinthians established the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, on the highest peak overlooking the city. Aphrodite's temple was staffed with a thousand female prostitutes.

This reputation became so entrenched that the verb, "to corinthianize" meant to practice immorality. The phrase, "Corinthian girl" was pejorative, meaning "prostitute." It doesn't seem likely, then, that the founders of this church had in mind the reputation of the ancient city of Corinth when they named the church.

In the early 50's A.D., the Apostle Paul established a church in the city of Corinth. The relationship between Paul and the Corinthians is a rather complicated one, actually. It seems Paul visited there at least three times, and he wrote as many as four or more letters to the Corinthian church, two of which are included in our New Testament. From

these writings, we know that the pull toward sexual immorality was still strong even among the converted Corinthians, but another problem emerged even greater: disunity.

Paul was not the only influential spiritual leader in the first century for the church at Corinth. Another itinerant teacher, Apollos, also spent time there. It's quite possible that the Apostle Peter also ministered at Corinth. The unfortunate result was that factions emerged among the Corinthian believers, each claiming a different loyalty. Some said, "I am of Paul." Others, "I am of Apollos." Still others, "I am of Peter."

There was yet another group who said, "I am of Christ." Whether they were sincere in giving their loyalty to the Lord alone, or whether they were just playing a game of one-upmanship is unclear. What is clear is that these Corinthians had organized themselves into at least four distinct groups that alienated the believers from each other.

Paul invested a considerable amount of space in I Corinthians addressing this unity problem. The issue carried over into II Corinthians, because the believers who were not loyal to Paul were making all sorts of untrue, misleading, and cutting remarks about the apostle. He wrote II Corinthians to set the record straight about himself personally.

Besides factionism, all sorts of other issues divided the Corinthians. They squabbled about anything and everything: marriage and celibacy, the eating of food sacrificed to idols, communion, spiritual gifts, the resurrection of the dead. Some of them were even taking other Corinthian Christians to the Roman courts with lawsuits. This was a torn congregation!

So I'm still puzzled. Why would someone name a church in Hickory after such a divided New Testament church? Or has the name become prophetic?

We can make a new reputation for the name, "Corinth."

One of the passages where Paul deals head-on with the unity problem is I Corinthians 3. In this chapter, Paul identifies some steps we can take toward renewing our unity.

In the first four verses, Paul gives the first step on the road back to unity: *recognize the evil of a divisive spirit.*

In these first chapters of I Corinthians, Paul makes several contrasts: God's wisdom vs. human wisdom; God's power vs. human effort; maturity vs. immaturity; the spiritual person vs. the worldly person.

Here in this chapter, Paul argues that a divisive spirit is immature, worldly, and of human origin. I have gone even further, labeling it as "evil," in part because I recently read a book by Christian psychiatrist Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*, recommended to me by a minister in this congregation.

Evil people, Peck argues, are usually not aware of their evil because they are so thoroughly self-deceived. That's why they are "people of the lie."

Dr. Peck says that most of the patients who come to him, especially voluntarily, are not evil, but victims of evil people. Those whom Peck labels evil have a pathological need to control others and to manipulate their surroundings. All the while they have an incredible capacity to deny that they are even capable of evil actions.

Peck's book, of course, deals primarily with those who are most thoroughly controlled by evil. We would all do well, I think, to recognize and confess more of our own thoughts, words, and actions as evil, because they are based on self-absorption (narcissism) and self-deceit.

I wonder how many of the members of this church who have used sharp words, who have harbored resentful feelings, and who have engaged in divisive activities are willing to agree with Paul that those actions are worldly, and to go beyond and recognize that they are evil?

If this congregation is typical, most of you at this moment are thinking of someone else in the church who has been saying and doing evil things. How about you?

The Heidelberg Catechism asks the question (112), "What is required in the ninth commandment (Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor)?" The catechism answers this way:

That I do not bear false witness against anyone, twist anyone's words, be a gossip or slanderer, or condemn anyone lightly without a hearing. Rather I am required to avoid, under penalty of God's wrath, all lying and deceit as the works of the devil himself. In judicial and all other matters I am to love the truth, and to speak and confess it honestly. Indeed, insofar as I am able, I am to defend and promote my neighbor's good name.

That, my friends, is mature, spiritual, and good. The first step toward unity is having the honesty before God and others to recognize the evil of a divisive spirit.

The second step is this: *Distinguish human loyalties from loyalty to God.* In this text, the Apostle uses two analogies to help us see who we are in Christ's church.

The first analogy is that of a garden. In this garden Paul pictures different workers, each with different specialties. One person plants; another waters. Which one gets the credit for the harvest? The one who plants or the one who waters? None of the above.

The Corinthians had become so enamored with human personalities that they had forgotten their ultimate loyalty transcended their gratitude to human leaders who had guided them along their spiritual journeys. Behind Paul, Apollos, and Peter was the Lord, who assigned each a task in his field.

The Corinthians had allowed themselves to become emotionally attached to these individuals. They were unable to break free of those attachments. In fact, their feelings were so strong that these attachments became exclusive. The end result was that they turned co-workers in God's kingdom into adversaries.

Those who had developed a strong loyalty for the Apostle Paul, for example, were unable to acknowledge the positive aspects of the ministry of Apollos, and vice versa. Surely neither Apollos nor Paul had intended to develop such exclusive loyalties. Those loyalties became divisive. The people inadvertently allowed their divisive loyalties to bring the real work of Christ's church to inertia.

When any church expends a significant amount of its collective energy on internal battles, very little is left for the real warfare all around us – the spiritual, social, and emotional battles on which the destinies of men, women, children, and even society hang in the balance.

One step toward a solution to that problem comes when people recognize a higher loyalty that transcends our rightful gratitude to human leaders whom we respect and who have made valuable contributions to our personal lives, our families, our church, and our community.

Is it possible that part of the unity problem here at Corinth is that individuals have developed informal cliques, and have come to think of themselves as Kilburnites, Sperryites, or Althousians? I talked with someone the other day who said to me, "You what the problem is with this church? Dr. Althouse died."

Yes, Dr. Althouse died. His body was not intended to be immortal. And Rev. Sperry resigned, as did Rev. Kilburn. Their ministries here were temporal also. Mine will be limited, too, if I come as your pastor.

Each of these men made clear contributions to this congregation, to its members, and to this surrounding community. God used each one to touch the lives of persons in this church. Across this congregation tonight are those who have been profoundly and personally affected by all three, each in different ways. New members came into this congregation under the leadership of all three.

And let's not forget the pastors whose ministry even predated that of Harry Althouse. They, too, had a part in God's plan of building Corinth Reformed UCC into what it is today. Each one made an indelible imprint on the lives of many people. But when they're gone, the church members must recognize that it was God's Spirit at work through that person touching the hearts of people. That higher loyalty takes precedence.

That's the second step on the road to unity: Distinguish human loyalty from loyalty to God.

The third step is based on the second analogy of the church Paul constructs for us in this passage. The analogy is that of a building. Paul says, “You are . . . God’s building.” (9b)

He goes on to elaborate: “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 foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

The third step to unity is this: *build on a common foundation – Jesus Christ.*

I have spoken much over the past few days and weeks about the importance of building consensus here at Corinth church. Should I come to this congregation, my task will be to lead you through a conflict resolution process that will enable us to identify the mission of this church – the reason God has called together this group of people in this place.

Paul identified the consensus for the church in ancient Corinth. Following his analogy of a building, Paul calls the consensus a “foundation.” The foundation is what binds true Christians together, the core of our faith, Jesus Christ.

Dr. Ken Mulholland, Dean of Columbia Biblical Seminary, warned me some years back not to cut myself off from fellowship with those who have fellowship with God. On what basis does God have fellowship with us? On the basis of our faith in Jesus Christ – alone.

When someone confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, I take him or her at their word. I reach out my hand as a brother in Christ, in spite of other areas of difference, even if those areas of difference occur on issues that are important to me.

The church that claims and proclaims Christ at the center of its life and ministry has the most essential common ground. The church that builds its foundation on the bedrock of who Christ is and what he did will endure.

In biblical times, the name “Corinth” had a negative reputation--both the city and the church. I’m afraid that currently the name “Corinth” in this city is not faring much better. It doesn’t have to be that way. We can make a new reputation for the name “Corinth”.

We can do it as we recognize the evil of a divisive spirit--not only in others, but in ourselves. We can do it as we distinguish human loyalties from our ultimate loyalty to God. And we can do it as we build on a common foundation, Jesus Christ.

In many ways, this “feels” more like a campaign speech than a sermon. I suppose that’s sort of inevitable in this situation. I do not in any way take for granted the process we are now concluding, or the result of this vote tonight.

I am fully aware that you may choose not to call me as your Pastor. I believe, though, that God has given me this message to give to you whether you call me or someone else as your Senior Pastor.

One final comment about the name, "Corinth." The city of Corinth in modern days has at least one outstanding feature that ancient Corinth did not have. I told you that the city sits on an isthmus, the only land mass between two gulfs which otherwise would connect the Aegean Sea and the Ionian Sea.

In ancient times, small boats would dock in the gulf on one side of the city, and be rolled across logs to the other gulf. In 1893, the Corinthians completed the Corinth Canal, a connecting waterway between the two gulfs on either side of the city. This 3 ½ mile canal is about 80 feet wide, and joins the Aegean Sea to the Ionian Sea.

In other words, the name "Corinth" now carries an image not of division but of connection – not of something that separates, but something that unites!

Let's take that model of Corinth for this church. Let's show to the world around us that we are Christ's disciples because of the way we love one another in spite of our differences. Let's build a new reputation for the name, "Corinth." Amen.