

The Foundation of the Cross

“According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” 1 Corinthians 3:10-11

Whenever the church in Corinth met, the spiritual gifts seemed to abound (1 Corinthians 1:7). Yet the spiritual gifts, which are received spontaneously by an act of faith, do not reflect the character of spiritual fruit, which is produced over time by an abiding faith. The Corinthians mistakenly thought they were spiritually mature because they did not lack in the gifts. However, the apostle Paul, who had spiritually fathered them in the Lord, rebuked the Corinthians for being worldly-minded and remaining immature infants in Christ (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). Paul then had to instruct them once again on the foundation for their Christian life and growth. Paul’s need to go “back-to-basics” with them works to our benefit since it enables us to also receive the apostle’s foundational teaching.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that the power of God and the foundation of their faith was in the message of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18). He emphasized that the gospel he preached to them was Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23). According to the New Testament record, what did Paul teach about the power of Christ’s crucifixion? Paul taught that Christ’s death on the cross had provided believers with a “divine exchange.” In other words, Jesus Christ, through His crucifixion, exchanged our sinful life with His holy life. Christ became cursed that we might be blessed (Galatians 3:13-14). Christ paid for our sins that we might be forgiven (Ephesians 1:7). Christ became sin that we might become righteous in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ died so that we might live through Him (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). Paul’s apostolic mission was to establish the church on this revelation of Jesus Christ and the power of His crucifixion.

That’s why he declared, “I am determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).” Paul taught everything we need to live the Christian life has been provided for us in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). As Christians, we know Christ died on the cross to provide us forgiveness for our sins. However, this is not the only divine provision given to us by Christ’s death. For Christ’s crucifixion also provided the way for us to become members of His body (Ephesians 2:23). This is the central purpose of the New Covenant, which was made possible by God including us in His Son’s death and resurrection (Romans 6:5). Christ not only died for us (Romans 5:8), we also died with Him (Romans 6:8). Our sinful nature has been crucified and removed from us so we would be freed from the power of sin and Christ could live in us (Romans 6:6-7; Colossians 1:27). In this sense, God performed a divine heart transplant by replacing our terminally sin-sick heart with His Son’s divine holy heart. Paul sums up this all-important consequence of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion by his testimony, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me (Galatians 2:20).”

The Corinthians were not the only ones who had to be reminded that Christ crucified is the precious foundation of our faith - both our justification and our sanctification. Paul had to constantly appeal to the early church that true spiritual growth could only be based on Jesus’ completed work on the cross. Tragically, it is a common problem for Christians to not know (because of ignorance or unbelief) what Christ fully accomplished for us by His crucifixion. That’s why Paul had to regularly ask, “Did I not clearly explain Jesus Christ’s crucifixion to you? Do you not know you have been immersed into Christ’s death? Do you not know your body is a temple of God and the Holy Spirit lives in you? Do you not know Jesus Christ lives in you?”

Some might say this is the ABCs of the gospel. Yes, it is the ABCs but it is also the XYZs. Our faith must begin and end at the cross.

The trouble is many of us have bypassed the cross and are trying to be moral by our willpower and effort rather than trusting in the power of Christ to transform us (Galatians 3:3). But if we attempt to build our spiritual life by any other foundation than Christ crucified, we are doing so by our natural strength. Paul compared this to building with wood, hay and straw. If we rely on our natural resources, we only produce dead works, which will not stand the test of fire at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). If we are trying to be good Christians by the best of our ability, we are living as mere men, perhaps even moral men, yet still inherently incapable of living the overcoming Christian life (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

Why did Paul focus his foundational teaching on Christ crucified rather than Christ risen? It’s not a question of relative importance but of divine order. Death always comes before resurrection (Romans 6:5). The basis for experiencing the power of Christ’s resurrection is to abide (stay rooted by faith) in the power of Christ’s death on the cross. Until we see by divine revelation that God has dealt a deathblow to our sinful nature and removed it, we may think we possess some usefulness to Christ within ourselves. However, when God reveals to us the divine purpose and verdict of the cross was to also make sure we were crucified with Christ so that we would be taken out of the way, we will cease to have confidence in our natural ability to do His work and bear His fruit. Indeed, if we don’t get out of the way, we become a hindrance to God and He cannot and will not work through us. The foundation of the New Covenant is Christ crucified. Our faith will only rest in the power of God (and not the power of our personality) when we know we have died and trust Christ to sovereignly live in us.

“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Galatians 6:14