



**Therefore encourage
one another
and build up each other...**

1 Thessalonians 5:11

25 April 2021

1 Corinthians 14:26-32;

Revelation 21:2-4; 1

Thessalonians 5:8-11

Touring God's Construction Site

First Mennonite Church

I'm currently watching a British TV programme called Grand Designs. It's about different people building their own homes. In each episode the host guides us through the trials

and tribulations of those aspiring to build a unique place to live.

Watching this TV series has made me realize that there is no way I ever want to build my own house! Second, building a house, especially when things don't go according to plan, can take a huge physical, financial, relational, and emotional toll. Finally, I'm learning that building or even renovating a home takes a great deal of planning, and discerning, and patience with everyone in the household! This is true even when everyone is on the page.



Last week I asked what is Mennonite? Is it a culture? A style of dress? Certain food? A style of worship? A language? My conclusion was Jesus Christ is foundational. Like all Christians, a Mennonite is nothing more than someone who has received the gospel—the indiscriminate gift of grace that God in Christ has given everybody.

Today, I want to talk about what we build upon this foundation. Foundations exist so that we can build something on it. When the apostle Paul uses the metaphor of Christ as our sole foundation, he assumes that we will build on it. What does building on the foundation of Jesus Christ look like?

I just want to be clear that I'm not talking about a building of mortar and brick, or wood and nails, but of **people and relationships**. When Paul talks about current

relationships in the church as well as how we establish and develop new relationships with others, he repeats what must have been a cherished phrase: **“build each other up.”**

Paul uses it many times in his letters. Here’s a sampling:

- When Paul addressed relationships between the weak and strong, he encouraged the strong to **build up the weak** (Romans 15:1-2)
- When Paul addressed those who claimed superior spiritual insight, he reminded them that **love builds up** (1 Corinthians 8:1)
- When Paul addressed those who claimed it was their right to behave in whatever way they wanted, he reminded them that **not all things build up** (1 Corinthians 10:23).
- When Paul addressed those who claimed they were more holy than others because they spoke in tongues, he urged them to use their spiritual gifts for **building up the church** (1 Corinthians 14:4-5, 11-12, 26).
- When Paul summarized his teaching to the Thessalonians, he reminded the congregation to **build each other up** (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

It seems that most fundamental task, and the highest service we can offer each other in the body of Christ, is to “build each other up”¹.

Years ago, Christians used the word “edifying” a lot. I haven’t heard it used for several decades, but I imagine that in some circles, the word is still used. The word edifying is just another way of saying “building up”—that is, constructing an edifice. Over the years, however, the word “edifying” has fallen out of favour. For some, the word was too often used to squelch criticism or not bring to light an inconvenient truth. For example, “Just be quiet about that matter. It’s only going to cause disruption and conflict. We’re a Mennonite Church—a peace church. Just sweep the issue under the rug. Be edifying. What will the neighbours think if this comes to light?

For others the word became too closely connected to unwelcome moralistic or pious overtones. An example of this could be someone coming up to me and saying, “You know, Rod, your word choice is a bit salty...perhaps, you could clean up a bit.”

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying there is no room for improvement in how Christians speak to one another, the choice of words Christians use when talking

¹ (see also Ephesians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11)

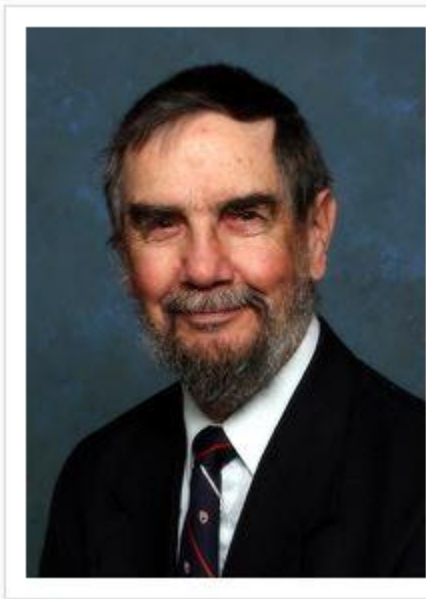
with others. Several years ago, the editors of the MC USA's magazine, the Mennonite, stopped publishing letters to the editor for one month. Why? Because good and honest Christians were using the letter to the editor platform not to disagree on points in an article, but to launch vicious personal attacks on the authors. No one wanted to write for the church magazine out of fear of being personally attacked. It became so bad that the editors decided to have the letters to the editor take a month-long vacation. Indeed, we must be reminded of the instructions in the letter to the Ephesians:

Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. (Ephesians 3:4)

What I'm trying to say is that, for Paul, the words "edifying" or "building up" have little if anything to do with cleaning up our act or our salty use of words. Rather, we should place "building up" front and centre into all our relationships as a way of building on our sure foundation, which is Jesus Christ.

Let me explain.

Many years ago, when I was in seminary in Winnipeg, I took a class with about 12



other students from different denominations—Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, and Nazarenes. Our professor, Mac Watts, was from the United Church. During one of our class discussions, I made a comment in class. I can't remember what our discussion was about or even what I said—all I remember was that it wasn't helpful or life-giving for the group.

A day or two later, I went to see Professor Watts about an assignment we were required to do. After, we were done talking about the assignment, he began to talk about that class, what I had said, and how it wasn't appropriate. The thing is, he

spoke in such a way that I could hear and accept it. When I left his office, I knew I had made a mistake. The amazing thing was, Professor Watts had done it in such a way that our relationship remained intact. Being able to speak the language of peace is a real gift!

Diplomats have the job they do because they often have the difficult task of saying unpopular things to another country while trying to maintain the relationship. In

the same way, Christians are called to speak the truth, not in a way that tears others down, but to speak the truth in love. **Building each other up** speaks not only to the care, deference, concern and love we have for each other, but also to the project of building up the body of Christ, in which we engage when we care for each other. To build one another up is to participate in the greatest endeavor any of God's creatures have ever engaged in. It means engaging in the construction of God's peaceable home, a home in which God lives with befriended and reconciled enemies, with lost children who have been welcomed home, with returned exiles and refugees. To build each other up is to participate in the God's plan to save and restore all creation.

Another part of building up God's home is the realisation that **the Church will always remain a construction site**. The building is never finished. Nor dare it be! The home of God will be under construction as long as rejected stones have not all been collected, as long as rejected materials are yet to be recycled, as long as there is still room on the foundation for more construction. The temple is perfect in its unfinished state, because, as 2 Peter 3:9 reminds us, the chief inhabitant of the home does not wish any—whether building materials or artisans—to be lost. No matter how many rooms there already are (John 14:2), more can always be added. “Building each other up” participates precisely in that immeasurably grand construction project.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:11 it says build up one another, which quickly brings to mind those we are already close to. I don't know about you, but that's not always a comfortable thought. It's often those closest to us in our circles of family, work, and church who irritate us the most, who test our capacity for building one another up most severely. This is one of the reasons why baptised believers become members. There is no such thing as lone ranger Christians. We are all construction apprentices—practically learning in the church what it means to love others as Christ loved us.

That said, the “breadth, length, height, and depth” of the foundation that is Christ invites us to contemplate how endlessly expansive the building project is that is going on around the globe. We may do our building on one small part of the construction site, but Paul's words about Christ being our foundation invite us to see our small contribution to the building as our small part of an immeasurably larger building project.



Back in 2006, I went to visit the MCC India office in Kolkata, which the British used to call Calcutta. It is a city of 15 million people, the city where Mother Theresa worked. I was there over a Sunday, so the MCC Rep in India, Ed Millar, decided to give me a diverse Christian worship experience.



St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral, Kolkata India

Our first stop was St John's Anglican Cathedral where we encountered a majestic and wholly other God in that massive building with its high ceiling and needed ceiling fans! Then we went to a different part of town, a poor section of the city, into a house-church where we sat on tiny stools shoulder to shoulder with hundreds of others singing songs, and listening to a lengthy sermon, the theme of which, I can't remember.

Then later in the day, we walked from the MCC Office to the Missionaries of Charity where I heard an incredibly simple yet profound theological explanation why Christians care for others. The priest noted that each one of us, no matter who we are or what we look like, carry this divine imprint of God's image. When we care for each other, when we build each other up, we minister none other than Jesus Christ.



Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa. Kolkata India

Touring God's construction site that day was a remarkable example of what happens when we move through God's vast global home at worship time. In that one day I moved from a majestic God in a very warm pew to a crowded, sweat-

filled room, and then to a simple chapel, an altar, and priest giving witness to why Mother Theresa and the Mission of Mercy did what they did.

If you would do the same here in Saskatoon one Sunday, I imagine you could experience something similar. That grand diversity is what the foundation that is Jesus Christ makes possible and sustains.

God's home here on earth is under constant construction and renovation. I dare say that the sounds most pleasing to God's ears are the sounds of building—of hammers, saws, drills, of shouts of direction and encouragement, and, yes, accountability and correction. Building each other up and thereby building the Church is music to God's ears. I find Ephesians 5:18 enormously instructive in this light. Notice that one of the manifestations of being filled with the Spirit, is to speak to each other, in effect to build each other up, with "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." The hymns and songs we sing are not just for God. Our first audience is each other, those next to us in the pew, those with whom we are engaged in the global construction project that is God's dwelling. That is what hymns are for. What are we doing when we sing, preach, and pray? Does our music build up? Does it create barriers? Does it equip us with the means with which to speak, to adore, to praise, to lament, to challenge—to build? Do we just want to sing our old favourites?

Most, if not all of us, have fairly strong likes and dislikes. These are often rooted in taste, in culture, in class, and sometimes in theology. I know I have some strong opinions—as my friends and family can readily attest. This tour through God's ramshackle and wondrous home forces me to acknowledge that no one does ugly



intentionally, and to acknowledge the exceeding generosity of our God who delights in our offerings when they are the first fruits of our best efforts. What God does not delight in is show-off attitudes: I thank you Lord that our part of the building, our music is more beautiful than theirs.

Finally, on our tour we see the effects of time and conflict: crumbling buildings and burned-out ruins. Sometimes these are the result of opposition to the reign of Christ, or the divine home owner's alterations to the building. And

sometimes they are the consequences of conflict among the builders. Lack of shared vision, lack of love or knowing how to love, lack of seeing that the best way to build on God's home is to build each other up, and sometimes a simple inability to talk over the divide of language, culture, and race often result in catastrophe and failure in our attempts to build the church. Diversity is valued in our day, but this often leads to an "anything goes" attitude that is ill-suited to the building of God's home. Paul already needed to deal with that with the Corinthians who relished their freedom and diversity. He adds his own important corrective when he writes:

"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "Everything is permitted," but not everything builds up (1 Corinthians 10:23).

Each of us can point to many times in church history, in our own histories, even in this church where we have experienced bad building practices, or outright sabotage on the work site.

But then, in the hands of the master builder, these divisions can come to reflect the wonderful creativity of the Creator and those he has created. Sometimes, the divisions in the body of Christ can result in the creation of something new.

Long ago, a bunch of people got together in order to build a tower up to heaven. They all spoke the same language, so they all thought the project would work. But they failed to realize that such a tall building needed a good foundation. God confused their language and the project was abandoned. When the healing of Babel occurred at Pentecost, it occurred without returning to one language. The great outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost resulted in everyone hearing in their own tongue (Acts 2:8-11). God evidently loves multilingualism.

Even though the Church is built on one foundation, Jesus Christ, it is incredibly diverse. You and me are not a building but a community of fallible people whom God has entrusted with the gospel, the good news. We help build the church by building each other up. Amen!