

“Many Places Together”

A Reflection for our Congregations' Anniversaries
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1st Corinthians 3:5-16

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Today's Bible reading comes from a letter the apostle Paul wrote to a small Christian group in the great Greek city of Corinth. Paul himself had started them off a couple of years earlier. He had come there and started talking about Jesus. Some heard him and were seized by this good news. They became the Messiah people in that place.

They were a tiny group in a big city. Yet the group grew and flourished. They met in their homes; there were no church buildings then.

Paul moved on. Another teacher arrived, Apollos. He taught them more about Jesus. The group soon split into factions. Some claimed allegiance to Apollos, others still to Paul.¹ Paul hears of this. He writes them, and goes to great pains to show that he and Apollos are actually allies in the same work for Jesus.

II

Listen to some of what Paul wrote, and hear God's word.

What is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants who helped you to believe. Each one had a role given to them by the Lord: I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. Because of this, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but the only one who is anything is God who makes it grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work together, but each one will receive their own reward for their own labor. We are God's coworkers, and you are God's field, God's building.

I laid a foundation like a wise master builder according to God's grace that was given to me, but someone else is building on top of it. Each person needs to pay attention to the way they build on it. No one can lay any other foundation besides the one that is already laid, which is Jesus the Messiah. So, whether someone builds on top of the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, or hay, each one's work will be clearly shown. The day will make it clear, because it will be revealed with fire—the fire will test the quality of each one's work. If anyone's work survives, they'll get a reward. But if anyone's work goes up in flames, they'll lose it. (However, they themselves will be saved as if they had gone through a fire.)

Don't you know that you are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you?

(Adapted from the Common English Bible)

¹ Still others claimed allegiance to Cephas (Peter), and others to Jesus himself.

What does this tell us about our story, our Bethany and Elora churches?

III

For countless generations people have been at home here. Communities of Attawadaron, Wyandot, Mississauga, and Haudenosaunee lived and worked through these forests and along these rivers.

However, back 186 years or so, in the early days of British colonization, the village of Elora wasn't much; it was only a few years old. Whatever it was, was on the south side of the river. Like here, Wellington and Woolwich (which now is called McNab).

One settler told of *"weary years, without school for the young family, no religious services, only occasionally a Methodist Itinerant would visit them. . . ."*

Methodists were a radical religious movement, not "respectable" like Anglicans or Presbyterians. But their movement was growing in Upper Canada. Every two weeks or so, a travelling preacher named Poole came to town. He led worship services in the Peck family home, which was about here.

Later on, another minister, the Rev. Wastell, had services in the afternoon at James Gerrie's place at High and Woolwich streets. Then in the evening he headed out for more worship at the Middleton farmhouse up in Bon Accord, east of Salem.

I expect that even when no clergy was there to lead a formal gathering, Elora's own citizens did their part to kindle their faith and give glory to God. They moved from place to place, wherever a family could host and there was enough room. Like Rowley Woods' log house. Then David Gilkison's home; it's large living room made it ideal from the growing congregation, though even it started to feel packed.

When Gilkison's became a store, they started using the stable out back of Josiah Johnstone's blacksmith shop in the summer, and Elora's new log school in winter months.

All this moving about was happening in just a few years. Maybe they got tired of it. Or people got tired of hosting them. Or, more positively-minded, the Elora society—Methodists called their congregations "societies"—was growing too large for any ordinary house.

So in about 1842, they put up their first purpose-built church congregation home. It was

30 by 36 feet. It's still here, on the roundabout. Later it was a family home, then a store, then a doctor's office, and now it's become a real estate office.

This new home served them well for two decades. But those Elora Methodists were not settled. Nor, it seems, was the Holy Spirit. One account said,

"The revival fire which burned brightly, . . . and the movement of the population of the village to the north side of the river, brought about a further and more ambitious building project . . . "

So in 1863 they crossed the river, to their church's new home. And here we are.

Not just here, though.

IV

On the road up from Guelph was a stagecoach stop, called Thorpeville. Later, they changed the name to Ponsonby. Nowadays, only bits are left. Still, in its heyday it had a hotel, wagon-maker, carpenter, blacksmith, general store, a Roman Catholic Church . . .

. . . and another bunch of those Methodists. They too were gathering for worship, encouragement, and learning the ways of Jesus. They called themselves the "Bethany Wesleyan Methodist" church. Theirs was much newer than the Elora one; they didn't get going until around 1843.

The Bethany folk also worshiped wherever they could find a place: barns, homes, sheds, the schoolhouse. Finally, in 1863 they constructed a stone building devoted to church use, on Joseph and Matilda Lasby's farm.

You could say the site was poor and the foundation unstable. Or, more positively . . . well, listen to what was written in a local paper:

For some time past it has been evident that Bethany Wesleyan Methodist Church was too small for the comfortable accommodation of the great numbers who attend services there. It was decided, therefore, to erect a new edifice on a commanding site, near the location of the old building. . . . When completed, the building promises to be the most handsome church in Pilkington.

In 1876, Bethany bought 3/8 acre from Catherine Thacker right across the line for a new church home. And it's been Bethany's home without disruption (well, except for

that time a tornado ripped the roof off). And here we are.

Not just here, though.

V

Here too, on Zoom. Yes, some of us are gathering in the Elora church building. We hope that soon others can begin gathering again in the Bethany building too. And some of us will keep meeting in these ways our ancestors never could have imagined.

Those first generations were a bit like those folks Paul was writing to. Sure, the Corinthian Christians were lost within a big metropolis, while those settlers were in what to them was wilderness. Still, they all belonged to Jesus and were enlivened by his Holy Spirit. Whether in the 1st century or the 19th, they were his church, meeting together wherever they could find a place.

Paul compares Apollos and himself to labourers working in the same field. They have different jobs; both work for the field's owner.

Paul is talking about this group of Jesus' people, and he says, "*You together are God's field. You together are God's building.*"² A bit later he says what kind of building we are: "*. . . you together are God's temple and God's Spirit lives among you.*"³

Remember, they don't have a church building, not yet. He's not talking about physical structures. It's us together, Jesus' people grouped, who are God's building, God's temple, a place of God's Presence.

God's! We, our group together, belongs to God. Sometimes we forget that. We are not a minister's possession. Not the board's. Not our town's. The church is Jesus' people, but it doesn't belong to the people: it's not ours, not those before us, not those who will come after.

God's field, God's building, God's temple. Built on our only foundation, Jesus. Its foundation determines a building's shape. We have to be shaped by Jesus: everything

² I've added in the word "together" to underline that Paul's describing them collectively. Otherwise, this passage can be mistakenly interpreted to be about individual Christians. This whole passage has suffered from misunderstanding by "those who would decontextualize it in terms of individualistic popular piety (i.e., how I build my own Christian life on Christ)." Gordon D. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 136.

³ For "among you," see Craig L. Blomberg, NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994), 75.

we do, everything we are. Shaped by who he is. By how he lived. By what he taught. By his self-giving death. By his resurrection promise of life. By his Spirit who fills us. By him who reigns to rescue, restore, and remake everything.

We together are God's field, God's building, God's temple, in all sorts of places. I took us on a tour of some places we have been. Where next? If these months have taught us anything, it's that we can never be sure.

Whatever is next, we know whose we are, and whose we will be, and who is our foundation.

Thanks be to God, through the Messiah Jesus our Master! Amen.