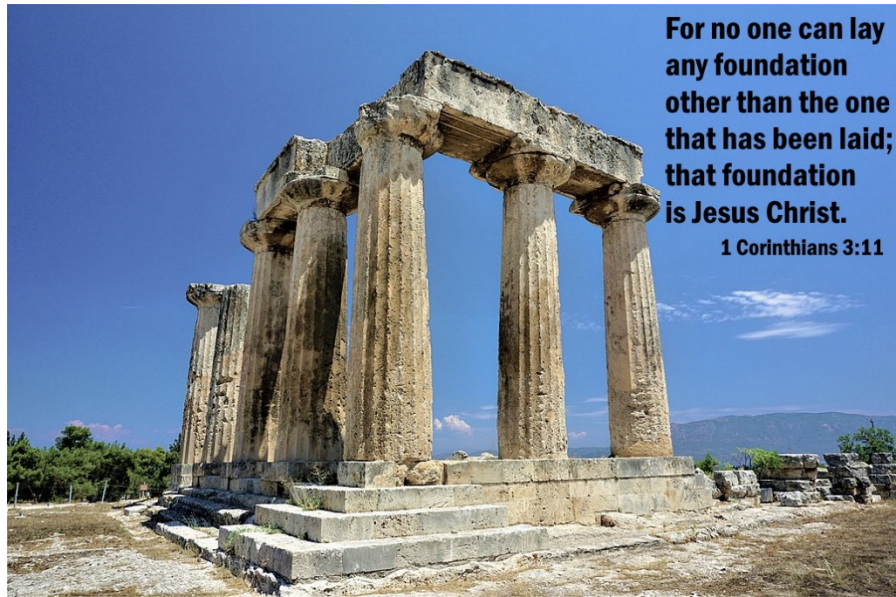


18 April 2021
1 Corinthians 3:1-15
No Other Foundation
First Mennonite
Church

What is a Mennonite? It depends on who you ask. I asked the Encyclopedia Britannica, and it said the Mennonites “arose out of the Anabaptists, a radical reform movement of the 16th-century Reformation. It was named for Menno Simons, a Dutch priest...” The article went on to say that “Mennonites are found in many countries of the world but are concentrated most heavily in the United States and Canada.” Of all the pictures of Mennonites that are out there, the editors of the Britannica Encyclopedia could have chosen this one to represent the Mennonites.



For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.
1 Corinthians 3:11

The ruins of the temple of Apollo in the ancient city of Corinth. It was built in 540 B.C. on the ruins of a much older temple. The temple initially consisted of 42 monolithic, 6x15 limestone columns, over 7 m high. In the Roman period, it was renovated for the purpose of Emperor worship. Today, only seven columns and its foundations are preserved.



Or they could have chosen this one.



Instead, they chose this stereotypical one to represent **all** Mennonites!¹

Oh, that reminds me that I forgot to feed my horse, Nelly. It's been hitched up with my buggy at the back of church for a few hours already, and it gets upset when it hasn't eaten. So, I'll need to leave soon so that I go

home and feed it!

Decades ago, when the Mennonite Church transitioned from worshipping in the German language to English, many people felt the Church was jumping off our solid German language foundation and into the worldly sand of the English.

A couple of years ago, I was at a Mennonite gathering here in Saskatoon. One person I talked to was upset that the word, Mennonite, had reached an all time low. She said, "too many people associate Mennonites with farmer sausage and vereniki/perogies, and German Roll Kucken." "And now", she said, "its associated with garlic—there's something called Mennonite garlic!"² In frustration she said, "we need to drop the word, Mennonite, in Mennonite Church and change it to the Anabaptist Church."



One of my relatives who attends a charismatic church likes to make jokes about Mennonites being old-fashioned, mostly because she has limited experience of how diverse Mennonite forms of worship can be.

What is a Mennonite? Is it a culture? A style of dress? Foods that taste great but gives you bad breath? A style of worship? A language? What's foundational?

Here on the prairies where Russian Mennonites are ubiquitous, where Mennonite sausage and Mennonite garlic are readily available, we often get side-tracked about what is foundational. When we talk about Mennonites, **we tend to talk**

¹ Mennonites riding in a horse-drawn wagon, Belize. Encyclopedia Britannica, © Grigory Kubatyan/Shutterstock.com

² <https://ttseeds.com/product/garlic-mennonite/>

about things that set us apart, create barriers. We play “the Mennonite game”, assuming certain last names are Mennonite. But I know Mennonites with names like Lee, Zhang, Park, Manickam, and Kitano who feel excluded as they don’t have the right name for the “Mennonite” game. I also know Mennonites who have never eaten Mennonite sausage, perogies, or Roll Kucken—have no idea what these things even are. Or, when we talk about the Mennonite Church, we **tend to focus on the institution**, the constitution, by-laws, and how the church is structured. We make statements of belief: “My church believes the Apostles’ Creed or the Schleithem Confession. My church practices believers’ baptism. My church is the Mennonite Church.” Or, when we talk about the church, **we assume its ours**: Not in my church we won’t...what have they done to my church?

I suggest that **such statements obscure the gospel**. If that is the case, then what is foundational to our faith?

In our Scripture passage for this morning, we find the Corinthian Church confused over foundational matters too. The specific concern here is different factions in the church claiming allegiance to different church leaders, which leader was foundational. Some claimed, “I belong to Paul” and others, “I belong to Apollos,” who was another apostle who worked with Paul, preaching and teaching about Jesus.

In an effort to remind them of some foundational principles, Paul writes, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:5-7).

In other words, Paul is saying, it doesn’t matter which leader the Corinthians prefer, whether himself or Apollos – what matters is how essential and necessary, yes, how foundational, Jesus Christ is for our lives as daughters and sons of God, individually and collectively.

I’ve never been to the ancient city of Corinth. I’ve only seen pictures. Very little remains of these ancient cities, except foundations, eery reminders of what once were homes, temples, schools, and bathhouses. I chose for the bulletin cover today, the Temple of Apollos from ancient Corinth. I was impressed by its more than 2000-year-old solid and durable foundation. It reminded me that

foundations serve a purpose, namely to furnish a solid basis for what is built on them.

If you only read this one verse in 1 Corinthians 3:11, you get the sense that foundations are typically immovable, solid, we might even say static. But it's important to remember that Paul uses this word, foundation, as a metaphor.

Last year I did a lengthy sermon series on metaphors for God. In one sermon I used the metaphor of ROCK, and asked what it means when we say God is a Rock. Is God an actual rock? No. I don't think for a moment that God is an inanimate object. I believe God is alive, active, and moving in the world. I then told the story



about when my family went to visit Tibet. Tibet, as you know, is in the Himalayas, which is a mountain range containing many of the earth's highest peaks, including the highest, Mount Everest. My family went to Mount Everest base camp on the Tibetan side. Even though we were at 5500m/18,000ft at base camp, Mount Everest still towered another 10K ft above us. It was truly beautiful and

awe-inspiring to see.

As a result of that experience, I can better appreciate the biblical metaphor, God as Rock, because for me, the mountains carry with them a beauty, wisdom and steadfastness that is at the essence of God. When I stood at Mt Everest base camp and looked up at Mount Everest I was moved to quiet awe. And so it is with God.

God is a rock. This is a metaphor. A rock or mountain isn't God, but a rock or mountain can point beyond itself to something else—to the steadfastness and the feeling of awe we get whenever we are in the presence of God.

When Paul talks about foundation its just but one metaphor among many that he uses. And its anything but immovable and static. Paul is quite capable of mixing metaphors, something I was taught, in school, never to do. Even within 1 Corinthians 3, where we find the image of Christ as our sole foundation, Paul presents himself as a mum feeding the Corinthians with milk, when he wished

they could already have graduated to solid food (v. 2). Then Paul is a farm hand, working God's garden plot (vv. 5-8), which turns out to be not just a field but a building, the foundation of which is Jesus Christ, a foundation on which he, his co-workers, and indeed all believers build together (vv. 9-15).

If we move to other parts of the New Testament, we discover that "foundation" can also refer to apostles and prophets, with Christ as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20; cf. Romans 15:20). We are reminded of Jesus' calling Peter the "rock" on which he would build the church (Matthew 16:18). And then, in clear dependency on Psalm 118:22, Jesus is referred to as a stone that was rejected, but who has become the precious head or corner stone, a stone of stumbling and judgment for some and a stone of healing and salvation for others (1 Peter 2:4-7; cf. Isaiah 28:16).

To push the metaphorical envelope even further, this stone is called a "living stone" (1 Peter 2:4), on which the many "living stones" of the people of God are built together into a "spiritual house"—God's own home—in which they also serve as priests.

It's enough to make your head spin! But, let me be clear. Our foundation is NOT the brick and mortar of this or any building. Our foundation is NOT a church constitution, by-laws, or set of rules and principles. Our foundation is NOT certain foods—not even garlic! Paul is NOT trying to point us to the metaphors themselves, but rather, to what the metaphors are pointing towards. And the point of all of these metaphors is to place us quite deliberately in immediate and intimate relation to **Jesus who is the foundation, the basis, the ground, and the orientation upon which, out of which, and according to which we grow and build.**³

What is a Mennonite? Before I answer that, let me tell you a story about a time when I lived in China, and someone perceived me as a heretic. Yes, you heard right. A heretic. I'm not just talking about simple nonconformity or unorthodoxy, but heretical in the sense of holding a religious belief that is contrary to traditional Church teaching. Interestingly, the label of heretic was never thrown at me when I lived in Canada. I thought I grew up in the most orthodox of places, Winkler Manitoba, assumed my biblical and theological training was in orthodox schools and seminaries, and presumed I was baptised into an orthodox

³ Built to Last: Jesus Christ as Ground and Goal, Prayer Guide by Tom Yoder Neufeld, 2007

Mennonite Church. So, being perceived as a heretic by a Chinese Christian was not only surprising but incredibly ironic as it happened to me in China, a stereotypically atheist and communist country!

Since the 1980s, Mennonite work in China focused on exchange. Mennonites from Canada and the USA went to China, often to teach English, and Chinese scholars from universities would come here to Canada or the USA to spend time in Mennonite schools. Early on when I lived in China, one of my jobs was to help identify Chinese pastors to go abroad to study in a Mennonite seminary. Two people the Mennonites sent to Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia was a married couple, Pastor Wu Wei and his spouse, Wu Jinzhen.



Pastor Wu left for the USA first, and Ms. Wu didn't join her husband for another year or so. During that year of separation, she asked me whether she and I could meet once a week for a language exchange where I would teach her English and she would teach me Chinese. At the time I assumed she wanted to learn English, but little did I know that her main purpose was more clandestine in nature.

You see, what I didn't know was that Ms. Wu was not at all pleased that her husband went to study at a highly questionable denominational school run by the Mennonites. At the time, many Chinese Christians knew about the Anglicans, the Presbyterians, and Methodist, but almost nothing about Mennonites. Ms. Wu's Chinese Dictionary of Religion had one line about Mennonites. Many of the old Church history books available in China decades ago portrayed Anabaptists and Mennonites very negatively. The radical Reformation in these books focussed on the bizarre apocalyptic spiritualism of Melchior Hoffman, the militancy of the Münsterites, and the extreme ideas of Jan van Leiden, a leader in the Münster rebellion. Jan van Leiden proclaimed himself the new David and encouraged polygamy among the Münster population. Ms. Wu knew about these stories, so it's not surprising why she was concerned for her husband.

She and I met every week for language exchange. I learned about her love of tea, not the cheap “only in Canada, eh”, Red Rose variety, but the real quality stuff with exotic names like Oolong and a light and fragrant tea named, Dong Ding. I also discovered Ms. Wu’s deep love for the Church. My eyes were also opened to some of the needs and problems of the Chinese Church, including the enormous need for qualified and trained pastors and infighting and politicking among pastors and other Christians.



During our language exchange she also came to a better understanding of the Mennonites. She came to understand the theological diversity in the Mennonite world. She was shocked to learn that I had read theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, C.S. Song, and Dorothee Sölle and how such reading was a normal part of seminary studies. She also gained a different perspective of Mennonite history after I provided her with a copy of C.J Dyck’s, “An Introduction to Mennonite History and J.H. Yoder’s, “Politics of Jesus.” Perhaps the single most influential thing I said to her was the day we talked about Mennonite history, and I told her about some of the problems with the Mennonite Church. That I could criticize my own denomination, but yet remain committed to it, wrinkles and all, spoke volumes to her.

The more I got to know Ms. Wu the more I came to appreciate how the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus was working through the Chinese Christians; the more Ms. Wu got to know me the more she learnt how the **same Spirit** of the resurrected Jesus was working within a denomination she had serious questions about. One day she admitted that she used to think of the Mennonites as a bunch of legalistic, heretical religious fanatics, and seriously thought I was one. Me. A heretic.

What is a Mennonite? A Mennonite is nothing more than a person who has received the gospel—the indiscriminate gift of grace that God in Christ has given everybody. A Mennonite not only confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, but follows and trusts in the Spirit of Jesus to guide him/her in daily life. You see, our foundation

is not a building, not a constitution, but a person, God incarnate, the Word made flesh, the carpenter from Nazareth. **Jesus Christ is our Foundation.** You and me are not a building but a community of fallible people whom God has entrusted with the gospel, the good news: without boundaries, without limits, without restrictions.

It took some time following Jesus' resurrection for Peter to understand that the Roman Centurion, Cornelius, had the exact same Spirit that he did. Jews and Gentiles—enemies—brought together as one body with Jesus Christ as the foundation. Thanks be to God!