

How to Build a Church

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now in the book of 2 Corinthians on chapter 13.! 2 Corinthians 13, page number 970.

And we're going to read from verse 1 to verse 10 of this chapter. 2 Corinthians 13, 1 through 10. Paul writes, God says, This is the third time I'm coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

I warn those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again, I will not spare them, since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me.

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you, we will live with him by the power of God.

[1 : 14] Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.

to God that you may not do wrong, not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong.

Your restoration is what we pray for. For this reason I write these things while I'm away from you that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

How to build a church. Over the last number of years the internet website Wikipedia has become huge. I have no doubt it will soon be replaced by artificial intelligence, but if you want to know anything Wikipedia usually has the answer. When I'm watching a film I use Wikipedia on my phone to tell me more about the actor, so if I'm reading a book I'll use Wikipedia to tell me more about the author.

Well Wikipedia has branched out and one of its sister sites is called WikiHow. WikiHow. You want to change a plug? Ask WikiHow and it will give you with pictures various ways in which you can change your plug.

[3 : 01] I was going to ask how many free church ministers does it take to change a light bulb, but you could ask Wikipedia that if you like, but I don't know whether. I don't know whether you'd be grateful to know this, but when I typed into the WikiHow website, how do I write a sermon, it didn't give me an answer.

I also typed into it the question, how do I build a church, which again WikiHow didn't answer. Rather it gave me answers to questions like, how do I dress for church, and listen to this one, how to flirt in church. But it did not answer the question, how do I build a church. Now given that we do not believe the church is a building, but a group of questions, of course this is not a question for architects, brickies, and electricians. The question of how to build a church is for us all. How do we build a group of Christians so that we can be the best we can possibly be in glorifying God in our mission, in our prayer, in our praise, in our fellowship, and in our service for Him. For questions like that, we don't need WikiHow, we just go to the Bible, because it's here in these pages God tells us all we need to know about how to build a church. And in this passage, Paul's going to give us three instructions for how to build a church, or as he says it in verse 10, building up a church. Now we could take these instructions from many other places in the Bible, especially from the direct teaching of our Lord in the Gospels. Perhaps the most basic is this, love one another as I have loved you. But the practicalities of that loving one another are detailed out in the rest of the Gospels and the New Testament. Now as we've seen throughout the last number of months, the church in

Corinth was struggling with false teaching and false teachers. They had poisoned the relationship between Paul and the church in Corinth. The church was in a mess. That is why Paul had written the letter of 1 Corinthians to correct the wrong beliefs and behaviors of the Christians in the church. He then sent his fellow worker Titus to check on whether the Corinthians had responded positively to his letter. And partly, it seems, they had. But there was still much room for improvement. And so Paul sent them the letter of 2 Corinthians to show up their faith to restore his relationship with them and to rebuild the doctrinal orthodoxy of the church, among other things. Paul wants the Corinthians to know that he loves them and that they need to stop being deceived by these false teachers. Churches can't be destroyed from outside by persecution or violence. They can only be destroyed from inside by wrong beliefs and wrong behaviors. You'll see from verse 10 that even though the Corinthians have caused him so much pain, he doesn't want to tear them down. He wants only to build them up. And this is to be our attitude as Christians. We want to build our church up, not tear it down.

Well, the three instructions Paul gives us to how to build a church are these. First, recognize. Second, examine. And thirdly, restore. Recognize, examine, and restore. Recognize the authority of the Word of God.

Examine yourselves as to where you are in the faith and restore your relationship with God and with other Christians. A friend of mine says it's not rocket science. You don't need to read manuals of management on how to build a church. These three instructions are simple and following them will inevitably lead to strengthening our fellowship as a family of believers, which will lead to a greater glory being given to God by our church. So, first way to build a church. Recognize, verses 1 to 4. Recognize.

[7 : 26] The situation in Corinth was complicated. False teachers had poisoned the church. They were trained in Greek philosophy and worldly wisdom. They were men of superior appearance, and their oratory was spellbinding. They were everything, really, Paul was not. They had polluted the church in Corinth with their twisted doctrines. Wrong belief always leads to wrong behavior. And that's why Paul had sent the letter of 1 Corinthians toward the church there about wrong belief and wrong behavior. For example, they dismissed the physical resurrection of our Lord from the dead. So, such teaching, along with many other features of their false doctrine, led to severe immoralities and inequalities within the church.

And that's why Paul had written the letter to 1 Corinthians. But having received news of how the Corinthians had responded to that letter, he now writes 2 Corinthians. Both times in 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, he's been very pastoral. He's been gentle and tender, not harsh. But there will come a time. There will come a time when he travels to Corinth and drops the soft act. He will come, and in the language of verse 2, not spare those who refuse to repent. He won't spare them.

He will put on display the power of Christ in the way he deals with these people. There will come a time when the soft, tender voice will be replaced by the voice of powerful authority. And in verses 1 through 4, Paul tells us it's coming soon if the Christians in Corinth who refuse to repent continue in their stubbornness. One of the pillars upon which a church must be built is the recognition of authority. One of the reasons Old Testament Israel became chaotic is, as we read in Judges 21, everyone did what was right in their own eyes. There must be guidance and authority in the church, lest there be wrong beliefs and wrong behavior. A free-for-all church where everyone does what's right in their own eyes is no church. And here in 2 Corinthians 13, Paul is asserting his right and authority to guide, lead, and judge the church. Back in 1995, I was visiting a friend who was serving as a missionary in Albania. And at that time, Albania was still emerging from extreme poverty of communism.

[10 : 19] Albanian society was very different from our own. One of the ways I discovered this was when I went to the bus station in the capital city of Tarana to take a bus to a nearby town. There was no electronic notice board, of course, just a notice that a bus left this station every 10 minutes. What happened next was the farce. So you got on the bus, and when the bus was full, that's every 10 minutes, when the bus was full, the driver came on and asked everyone where they wanted to go, right? And if the largest group on the bus said south, everyone who wanted to go north got off and waited for the next bus, hoping the majority on the next bus wanted to go north. And if the largest group on the bus said west, everyone from the who wanted to go east got off and waited for the next bus, hoping that the majority of people on that bus would go east. Now, you can imagine it

led to a kind of wee bit of confusion.

You end up never getting to where you want to go. I haven't been back to Albania since, but I do hope their bus services run a wee bit better. There needs to be clear direction. If you get on this bus, you are going to go north. If you get on that bus, you're going to go south, and so on. Without that clear direction and authority, there is anarchy, and everyone does what is right in their own eyes or just follows the majority unthinkingly. In verse 3, you'll notice Paul says, Christ is speaking in me.

Christ is speaking in me. Christ is the head of the church, and I'd like to think that we'd all acknowledge it is what Christ says which is of ultimate authority. The question then becomes, through whom does Christ speak such that we submit to his authority and guidance? Through whom does Christ speak such that we should listen to his authority and guidance? Paul here claims it for himself. Christ is speaking in me, he says. But it doesn't therefore follow that over the last 2,000 years. Christ speaks through the church's self-appointed leaders because Paul was an apostle of Christ, directly commissioned by him, and we are not. Many men have claimed to be leaders through whom God speaks and therefore must be implicitly obeyed. But many of those men have been charlatans, liars, abusers.

In our culture of the worship of prominent men in evangelicalism, this mistaken authority often leads to bullying and abuse. So again, we ask the question, if that authority does not come from human beings, where does Christ speak, lead, guide, and exert authority over his church?

And our answer is that he speaks through his word, the Bible, these writings inspired by the Holy Spirit, written down by Spirit-inspired apostles like Paul. It's in these 66 books of the Bible, Christ speaks and leads his church. It's as these scriptures are faithfully expounded and applied, Christ is addressing his church, guiding, challenging, correcting, and comforting.

[14:03] It's only as the Bible is front and center of our life as a church that we avoid the chaos of an Albanian bus. So is the Bible front and center of the principle and practice of our church?

Why do we do things the way we do in this congregation? Why do we say things the way we say them? Is it because, sorry, it's because Christ, we believe, speaks to us through the inspired apostolic writings of the Bible? It's not because our culture demands us to do these things, or because, well, we've always done them this way, or because of our personal preferences.

It's because here in the Bible, we find food for our faith, light in our darkness, and order in our chaos. Is the Bible front and center of our lives as individual Christians?

Are we living according to Christ's voice speaking to us through its living pages? If we want to build a church, we must build it on the solid foundation of the Word of God and recognize its supreme authority over all we believe and over all we do.

Recognize. Secondly, from verse 5 to the beginning of verse 9, examine, examine. Examine yourselves to see whether you're in the faith. Test yourselves.

[15:38] You'll notice this has got nothing to do with communion, by the way. Remember when we were young? Those of us who were born and brought up in the free church, this was often used at communion time. It's got nothing to do with communion.

Anyway, examine yourselves to see whether you're in the faith. One of the watchwords of the Protestant Reformation was *semper reformanda*. *Semper reformanda*. Which means, I believe, Sarah can correct me?

Always reforming. Always reforming. The church must always be analyzing its doctrinal positions according to the standards of the Bible. If at some point the church finds itself at odds with the plain teaching of the Bible, the church must change itself, not change the Bible.

Semper reformanda constantly calls the church to examine and test herself against the teaching of Scripture, which, as we've already seen, is our final authority for all we believe and all we do.

But here Paul's calling us to examine ourselves to test whether we're in the faith, whether we're truly Christians, we're to test ourselves.

[16:52] Middle-aged men, like me, are called every few years to attend a nurse practitioner to do what's called a well-man check.

At this check, the nurse measures your weight, your pulse, your blood pressure, tests perhaps involving little quantities of your blood.

The idea is to make sure that you're healthy and to spot warning or life-limiting signs. And by the authority of the Holy Spirit, Paul is instructing us to do well-man checks on ourselves, to examine

ourselves, to test whether we're in the faith or not.

And yet, I can't tell fully there's more here than meets the eye. It's not as if I don't think the Apostle Paul is asking the Corinthians whether they're Christians or not.

He's calling them to remember they are already Christians, that Jesus Christ is in them. Not so much whether they are in the faith, but where they are in the faith.

[18:07] Or in other words, I don't think Paul's calling them to examine themselves to see whether they're Christians or not, as much as he's calling them to examine to what extent are they living faithfully to their profession as Christians.

To realize that the living Christ lives in them, and therefore they are to take their profession as Christians more seriously than they have been.

If Christ is in them, there's no room for wrong belief. There's no room for impurity. There's no room for unfaithfulness. And so the question resolves into this, is how I live matching up to what I believe?

Can I square my lifestyle with the presence of Christ in my heart? That's the measure of our Christian profession. That if we're Christians, we're living as Christians should be living.

And this requires serious and sober self-examination on our part. With a Bible in one hand and prayer in the other, we test and examine every area of our lives to see whether we match up to our profession as Christians.

[19:32] Confession time. As a student, I was very faithful in attending church every Sunday morning and every Sunday evening and on a Wednesday night. But what about the other times of the week?

I spent way too much time at the pub. Far too little time reading my Bible. Sharing fellowship and praying with other Christians. Or before I became a minister, when I worked in industry in the south of England, again, I was really faithful in attending church on Sunday morning and Sunday evening. But during the week, I didn't treat those I worked for or those who worked for me with the respect they were due. And even in the ministry, I find myself constantly falling short of the standards of Christlikeness.

And I'm sure every minister feels the same way I do. That although we can be very successful ministers, we can be mostly, most unsuccessful Christians. Well, that's just work.

Student, working in industry, being a minister. That's just work. What about my marriage? What about my friendships? What about how I relate to other people in the church?

[20:47] What about how seriously I take my responsibilities as a citizen of the United Kingdom? What about the way in which I relate to God? Or the way I maybe take Christ and His grace for granted?

Am I actively putting sin to death in my life and living in the love of Christ? Am I keeping in step with the Spirit of God?

Am I growing in my faith? Am I active in sharing my faith with those who are not yet Christians? Christians? If Christ is in us, then we are not who we once were.

We're being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory. So you can see that in every area of our lives, we've got our work cut out. Because our whole lives as Christians are to be a constant self-examination to test whether we are matching up to our profession.

Are we holding on to the grace of Christ? Are we growing in our faith? And the point is for all of us here this evening, listen carefully, ask this question of yourself.

[21:52] Am I taking my faith seriously? Because you can't build a church with people who are not interested in growing as Christians.

Who are happy to come to a church which is little more than a social club. But not a holy temple where pursuing holiness and living in the love of Christ is primary.

This is calling us all to engage in our own spiritual well-man checks. If we want to build and grow this church, we do so on the basis of a serious and earnest desire to grow as Christians and express our faith in Christ in the way we live and serve.

Are we serious about our faith? So perhaps this week we've all got our work cut out to prayerfully examine ourselves again.

To see to what extent we are growing in and expressing our faith. Examine. Well then thirdly and lastly, restore.

[23 : 12] We're getting to the end of the book now. The church in Corinth was desperately imperfect. It believed the wrong things, therefore it behaved the wrong way.

Because what it believed about God was wrong by virtue of the false teachers, how this church was treating other Christians was also wrong.

So for that reason, their fellowship as a church was divided along gender, social, and economic lines.

Gender, social, and economic lines. It was even divided in its attitude to Paul and his authority as an apostle. Everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes.

It was a little bit like an early 1990s Albanian bus. It was a wreck of a church. At every level, the Corinthian church needed restoration.

[24 : 10] Now we often talk about churches needing restoration work. And what we mean by that is that the building's out of date, the roof is leaking, or the heating system is broken. So a restoration project appeals for money.

But the restoration project envisaged by Paul and spoken of in verse 9 has nothing to do with buildings and everything to do with relationships.

It's relationship with God. It's relationship with Paul and his authority. And it's relationship with other Christians. So Paul writes, Your restoration is what we pray for.

Your restoration is what we pray for. That word restored can also be translated as wholeness. Your wholeness, your maturity is what we pray for. Wholeness, restoration, and maturity in the Christian life is expressed in this.

That our relationships with God and his people are functioning as they should be and characterized by love, forgiveness, holiness, and grace.

[25 : 19] And everything Paul has written about in 1st and 2nd Corinthians is with this in mind. Everything theologically is written, everything practically is written, that Christians within the church in Corinth should have restored relationships with God, with him, Paul, and with each other as Christians.

So, for example, we can go back to 1st Corinthians 15, with its clear teaching of the basics of the faith. The incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, salvation through faith alone in Christ alone. And we realize that Paul has emphasized these theological truths because he wants the Corinthian church to experience restoration in its relationship with God.

And some of us might say, why do we always spend so much time talking about theology from the pulpit? Why can't you just preach practical sermons?

But, you know, without the theology of the gospel, there can be no effective practice of the gospel. So, Paul wrote 1st Corinthians 15 because he wanted the Corinthians to restore their relationship to God.

[26 : 48] Or let's go back to 2nd Corinthians 4. We looked at this about four months ago, I don't know. There's Paul's discussion of his own personal weakness. He holds the treasure of the gospel in jars of clay.

He's no super apostle using his human charisma, natural talents to hypnotize gullible Christians. Rather, he is setting forth the glory of Christ in the simple beauty of the gospel, while at the same time drawing absolutely no attention to himself at all.

Repeatedly throughout this letter of 2nd Corinthians, we've heard him talk about how much he loves the Corinthian Christians. Paul wrote 2nd Corinthians 4 because he wanted the Corinthians to restore their relationship with him.

Or let's go back to 1st Corinthians 13, perhaps the most famous of Pauline writings. Paul's discussion of the supremacy of love. In a church where prominent leaders were boasting about their gifts, and Christians were divided along social, gender, and economic grounds, Paul declares, love is patient, and love is kind.

Love does not keep a record of wrongs. Love never fails. And he draws this most marvelous word picture of Jesus. Love is patient, he says.

[28 : 19] Love is forgiving, he says. Love is kind, he says. Just like Jesus. And he sets forth love as the pinnacle of gospel virtue.

Faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these, he says, is love. Love. Paul wrote 1st Corinthians 13 because he wanted the Corinthian Christians to restore their relationships with each other.

If we want to build a church, we focus not on logistics, we focus on love. Not on reason, but on relationships. Not on planning, but on passion.

And all these things predicated and entirely dependent upon the experience of the forgiving grace of Christ in the gospel and the promised power of the Holy Spirit.

So again, we must ask ourselves a question. If we want to build this church up so it can glorify and enjoy God, we need to restore and mature our relationships with God, with his authority in the Bible, and with other Christians, what are we doing to achieve that?

[29 : 37] Can we at least forgive the grudges we hold against each other? Can we bear with one another's idiosyncrasies? Can we pray for and maybe with each other?

Can we together sit under the authority of the word of God, myself also? Can we overcome our natural suspicion of others and make ourselves vulnerable to other Christians?

Can we pursue genuine friendships with other Christians? Can we serve together in the work of the gospel? Can we do to restore and mature our relationships with God, with his authority in the Bible, and with other Christians?

Now you can go home and you can ask Wiki how to build a church. You won't get any good answers. Don't go home and ask it how to flirt in a church. Please. If we're left to ourselves, it'll be like that 1990s Albanian bus station where everyone does what's right in their own eyes, an embassy of hell, not of gospel beauty.

It's not rocket science. It is far more important than that. To build a church, we need to recognize the authority of the word of God. We need to constantly examine ourselves and live as Christians should, taking our faith seriously.

[31 : 03] and by God's grace, restore our relationships with him, with the Bible, and with each other. Because ultimately, a church built on the foundation, these foundations, it will stand strong.

It will be healthy in its spiritual growth and will bring much glory to the Christ who is our Savior, our Lord, and our Head.

Let us pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, we recognize the searching eyes of the Holy Spirit as he probes our hearts through your word, the Bible.

And we bless you, Lord, for its plain teaching here in 2 Corinthians 13 about how, what claims authority in our church, which isn't the culture around us, but the clear teaching of your word.

And, Lord, that we need to take our faith seriously. We need to get rid of those junk things in our lives which pollute our faith and pollute our witness, keep us from following Christ more earnestly.

[32 : 20] And, Lord, we need to invest in our relationship with you and our relationship with your word and our relationship with other Christians.

Forgive us, Lord, for not taking these things seriously, but for getting on with our own hobbies and pastimes and our own pleasures and comforts, our own work, excusing ourselves from the basis that we're just like everybody else in our society when you're calling us to be altogether different. We want to be different, Lord. We want to be holy for you. Give us the grace so to do. In Jesus' name.

Amen.