

THE STONES CRY OUT
1 Corinthians 3

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
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Opening of The Loft

GRATITUDE

Today is a day of gratitude. Gratitude for you, the generous people who made this day possible. From the day that we broke ground on Sunday evening, September 18, 2022, to today's opening celebration has been 931 days. The people to thank are too many to mention. In fact, in some ways the most important names are intentionally left unsaid. Because of our silence, God will give them their glory.

I would like to thank the **City of Amarillo** who worked with us instead of against us to add this beautiful facility to our city. When our baseball stadium, Hodgetown, was dedicated in 2019, the most impactful downtown edifice in Amarillo to be built in the 21st century was the Globe-News Center for the Performing Arts dedicated in 2006. For greater Amarillo to grow and thrive, the center of the city must set the pace. First Baptist Church today adds a third downtown edifice that will serve our city alongside those two 21st century accomplishments.

The next expression of gratitude goes to **Charles R Lynch Architects**, who are unusually gifted at casting grand visions – visions that connect to the past and, yet, point to the future. The architects have woven 135 years of buildings together, both harmoniously and with beauty that exceeds the imagination.

Another expression of gratitude goes to Southwest General Contractors and all the sub-contractors who served by their side. The list is too long, of course, to name names, but I am going to name two, knowing I leave other equally important names out. Thank you to Gary Purser and his capable team, who helped fashion the dream at its earliest stages. And to John Durr, the project superintendent, who answered the phone on the 2,793 times that I called. And I am not exaggerating.

Next, I thank **Baptist Community Services**. Dr. Winred Moore had a vision to construct a residential community for senior adults as the church's best neighbor. He also dreamed of one day building a connecting corridor between the senior facility and the church campus. Because of our partnership with BCS, that dream is fulfilled today. From the beginning, Steve Dalrymple and the BCS leadership were committed partners. Together, Baptist Community Services and First Baptist Church ministries span 15 continuous blocks of downtown Amarillo. Thank you, BCS. We are bridged together as one.

Next, **Amarillo National Bank**, who was beside us and behind us to help in any way needed. The First Baptist Church and Amarillo National Bank relationship exceeds a century.

And the **First Baptist Church staff**, who worked overtime and extra time to make it happen.

And the next group to receive our gratitude is the most important group – **you, the church** who believed, dreamed, worked, gave and sacrificed, thinking about the future generations more than you thought about yourselves. Because of your gracious gifts, we were able to do the unimaginable.

Somehow God took our loaves and our fish and multiplied them to the point where, though it will be expensive to operate the ministry, the building itself is paid for. No note. No loan. No debt. Done! A pastor can only lead if he has folks willing to walk beside him. We have been hand-in-hand, heart-to-heart. Most of all, therefore, I am grateful for you.

THE STONES CRY OUT

1 Corinthians 3

Vs. 9-11

“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building. 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 let each man be careful how he builds upon it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

V. 16

“Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”

If you listen carefully, you can still hear the pounding of the chisel against the limestone. Builders of the medieval cathedrals. During the cold months, when no mortar could be set, the masons, the craftsmen, spent the winter chiseling out the stones, the square blocks and the decorative capitals that would be set in the warmth of spring. Sometimes this ancient mortar, itself, would take 100 years to fully set.

These great cathedral builders had a deeper approach to life. They were never tempted by the tyranny of the urgent. They gave themselves to the abiding, the enduring.

There is the master mason now. Watch him as the bishop comes over and helps, at least for ceremonial appearances, lay the cornerstone, the foundation stone. But in reality, both the bishop and the chief mason know that they will never live to see the end of the construction of the great cathedral.

The mason’s great-grandson or his great-great-grandson will eventually lay the capstone almost a century after the mason laid the foundation stone. These master craftsmen were building edifices that would stand for thousands of years.

Incredible. No cranes, of course, to move the stones. No lifts to carry the mortar.

People rightly marvel at the pyramids of Egypt – but they are dwarfed by the great cathedrals of Europe. Even the Statue of Liberty could be housed within these man-made marvels, which each contain 100 million pounds of stone – making them as heavy as the Empire State Building.

These sacred spaces of worship could never have been created by the efforts of a single generation. Therefore, no architect ever lived long enough to see his cathedral completed. Each successive generation of masons passed down their passion for creating a sacred space in which to worship the God worthy of their best.

In a day when life expectancy was short and a plague might wipe out half the village population, when people had nothing for themselves, they gave everything they had to build glory to the house of God. These ancient worshipers didn't live in gated communities. Rather, they wanted God to have the cathedral, the courts, the finest of all facilities. And though they knew they would never see their handiwork finished, their reward came from imagining that one day their sons, their daughters, their grandsons, their granddaughters would worship in a building that they had given their best to create.

At First Baptist Church, we have been building for 135 years. Sometime, walk out to the still cherished Original Building and see the sign that declares it all began with the driving the first nail in 1890.

As Patrick Poole has described, when you enter a sacred space of worship, it's not really even an experience. It's an encounter with God. Because of the permanence, the perspective, and the purpose of this place, you quickly understand that this encounter is more than just about you. The enormity of the room and structure dwarfs you, and the stones, themselves, seem to cry, "Look higher. Look higher." (www.patrickpoole.com, 11/19/05)

As we enter these grand, sacred spaces of old, all of our haughty pretensions and all of our pride disappear as we realize that we have overstated our importance and we have, likewise, overstated our problems. These cathedrals were intentionally designed by the master architects of old to make us look beyond ourselves and turn our thoughts to God. Like Solomon's Temple, designed by the hand and mind of the greatest architect of all – God – they call us to the holy, to the mystical, to the sacred.

When you enter a cathedral, you realize you may have a place in this world, but your significance can only be found as you have relation to the infinite Creator and His people, the great cloud of witnesses.

Some of these churches took over 500 years to build. Five hundred years.

These great cathedrals were, of course, the tallest and grandest buildings of their time. It's true – in every culture and in every place – the houses of worship ought to be, and must be the grandest structures in the city.

And these great cathedral builders weren't trying to bring any glory to themselves. They were going to be gone before the ribbon was cut or the dedication was uttered. They all died and were buried with the church unfinished. They were building a soaring testimony to the majesty and transcendence of the Almighty.

Like the makers of the ancient cathedrals, through 135 years of building, the members of First Baptist Church have created sacred space – something transcendent has happened at 12th and Tyler that really can't be described.

What captures me most is that these cathedral builders thought beyond themselves. focused on the faith of the next generation.

You see, what I have discovered is something called “cathedral think,” the psychology of building sacred spaces for and with the next generation. The cathedral builders had to have a dramatic impact upon their city so as to propel the project into the future with such a force that successive generations would pick up the ball and run. Or should I say pick up the chisel and hammer – hammer away at building the sacred space.

They wanted to build something that would last – really, really last. And if you're going to do that, you can't be consumed with the here and now. You have to have an eye on the future, even while you're tempted to give into the pressure of the present.

Cathedral thinking is the opposite of revolutionary thinking. Revolutionaries want big changes really fast. The cathedral builders didn't think of life that way at all. When you and I bring cathedral thinking to our own lives, we realize we must live strategically, rather than just simply day to day. We must leave an inheritance for the next generation. We just get ready to pass the baton from ourselves to our children.

The cathedral builders reminded me of those who have gone before us here at First Baptist Church of Amarillo. We find ourselves having inherited one of the grandest of all spaces of worship in Baptist life, in Protestant life. Let us remember those 16 members who organized the First Baptist Church of Amarillo in 1889.

We are grateful today for our forebears who built our beautiful sanctuary. They had a vision beyond themselves. Like European cathedral builders, they thought about us and not about the easiest, quickest, or least expensive way to construct God's house. They left us a legacy, giving sacrificially for years after the construction.

Dr. G. L. Yates stood on that glorious first Sunday morning in this sanctuary, and proclaimed:

“Humbled by a profound sense of God's infinite goodness toward us and chastened, we trust, by the difficulties which have been met by us, our hearts thrill with joy unspeakable as we stand in this epochal hour and behold the fulfillment of our dreams. [T]he glorious building, which has been pronounced by many competent judges to be a miracle of beauty and marvel in architectural design and execution, has a meaning and significance for us who have toiled and prayed and sacrificed for it that no human tongue could tell....

“I grant you that this is an expensive church, a marvel of beauty. It cost some of us far more than the world will ever know.... This building, for some of us is our box of spikenard. Many complained in Mary’s time that her gift to the Lord was too extravagant. But somehow, as she did, we want Him to have the best. Love is always extravagant. The most expensive building in the world was Solomon’s temple to the Lord. When men pass [our church], may they say how those Baptists loved their Lord. We want this building to speak of our devotion and loyalty to the faith, our belief in the freedom of the human soul, the right for each to approach his salvation through faith....”

He continued,

“Our prayer today is that this church may be the birthplace of thousands, and from it will go the light of salvation till all shadows and darkness are gone and the world is flooded with the light of the perfect day.”

Cathedral thinking, for us, is not just about giving sacred spaces to the next generation. It’s about giving a passion and a vision for the gospel of God. Christianity is not an institution. It’s the flowing movement of the followers of Jesus.

You see, the forefathers of our faith at First Baptist Church of Amarillo never envisioned building a structure as an architectural marvel alone. They built as a base for missions. You make Jerusalem strong, and then you can go to the uttermost parts of the earth. And, as we host six international congregations at First Baptist Church of Amarillo, God has brought the nations to our doorstep.

In fact, even as Dr. Yates spoke of the glory of God found in this beautiful sanctuary, he said, “This church was erected as a missionary church. God grant that it may never disgrace its name. It must speak to our children of our missionary zeal.”

Sometimes I’ll hear someone say, innocently enough, “The church is not a building; it’s the people.” But what if the church is a building because the people are a building? The testimony of the apostles is clear: the people of God are “lively stones” built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). Even the “temple of God,” the place where God has chosen to dwell on earth (1 Corinthians 3:16). Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:9, “For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.” And then in verse 16, “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the spirit of God dwells in you?”

Church buildings have been dumbed down in modernity, mostly because God’s people have lost their sacred imagination. There is a failure to understand that all structures communicate something, they communicate meaning and purpose. The rocks are never silent, not even the rocks of the New Testament which cry out to Christ’s glory. Thus, the question is not whether the space has a definitive message, but rather, which message it proclaims. Our desire for The Loft is the message of the gospel of our glorious God written in stone. (“The Church is a Building,” NoJesuitTricks, 1/20/2022)

Architects are good artists only insofar as they are faithful theologians. Since building is essentially an embodiment of ideas, it behooves architects to insist that those ideas be shaped by a robust theological tradition. All buildings everywhere are architectural speech. The church buildings speak on behalf of God.

Let's make sure that our buildings are telling the truth, the gospel truth.

First Baptist Church has never been about building buildings in the sense of mortar and stone alone. We're in the business of building disciples. With this particular building, we're in the business of building future disciples (students) for the kingdom of God.

Yes, as of today we are done building this facility. Now we use the building to build greater things – to build students who follow Christ.

What Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 3 is we are fellow workers together on God's building. It says in 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, "According to the grace of God which was given to me [Paul], like a wise master builder I laid a foundation and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds upon it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." The story of the crucified and resurrected Christ is the foundation upon which our church rests. Paul goes on to say in v. 16, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you [plurally, the gathered church]?"

There is a story of three bricklayers that has been around for a while. It's a multifaceted parable with different variations, depending on to whom and when it is told. But most likely, it's rooted in something of an authentic story. After the Great Fire of 1666 that leveled London, the world most famous architect, Christopher Wren, was commissioned to rebuild St. Paul's Cathedral. One day in 1671, Christopher Wren observed three bricklayers on a scaffold: one was crouched, one was half-standing, and one was standing tall, working very hard and fast. To the first bricklayer, Wren supposedly asked, "What are you doing," to which the bricklayer replied, "I'm a bricklayer. I'm working hard laying bricks to feed my family." The second bricklayer, the one half-standing, responded, "I'm a builder. I'm building a wall." But the third bricklayer, who was way ahead – the more productive of the three and the future leader of the group – when asked the question, "What are you doing?" replied with a gleam in his eye, "I'm a cathedral builder. I'm building a great cathedral to the Almighty."

If I were to add to this story, I would add a fourth bricklayer who, had he been building at The Loft these past 931 days, could have said, "I'm building disciples, students equipped to follow Christ."

Yes, the brick and mortar is never about the brick and mortar, but about building lives. Building the true temple of God which is the gathered people of God. In our midst, the holy God dwells. Here God, Paul says to the gathered church, dwells in you.

Recently, when no one else was around, I walked around The Loft in silence and solitude, and my soul sang one song – "Our people are to be commended." Just like our forbearers who built this one-of-a-kind sanctuary, at great risk and with great courage, our present people (you) have

joined them in handing a missional space to future generations. I weep with gratitude for you. You are a remarkable people – I may be a bit prejudiced, but there is no church like you – First Baptist Church of Amarillo.

To God's glory –with gratitude for the hearts and hands that made it possible – with prayers that the disciples of the next generation will be born here – we dedicate The Loft. And as Dr. Yates would say, were he standing here today, "May all who drive by this building declare, 'My how those Baptists love their Lord.'"

To God be the glory.

And to our people, we give thanks.