

To Build or Not To Build, That is the Question
(But It's the Wrong Question!)
Genesis 11.1-9; Mark 14.3-9
April 10, 2005

“If you build it... they will come.” That quiet call was whispered into the ear of an Iowa farmer, driving him to plow under acres of his livelihood and to spend his life savings and mortgage his house on genetically modified outfield grass and sifted truckloads of infield dirt, on stadium lighting and bleacher seating in a corn field. It is the voice that called him to wait in the Iowa heat for a word of clarity. And, finally, it came. They came. Shoeless Joe Jackson and his hardball conspirators, outlawed from baseball for life for throwing the 1919 World Series. The field was for them, and for all who could see them, and as they entered the paradise that Ray Kinsella had built for them, he had his satisfaction. If you build it, they will come.

“Field of Dreams,” is a great movie scattered with deep truths, but the basic plot, namely, that spending our life savings to build grand venues in hopes that someone will one day fill them up (and satisfy us in the process), is one that we should hold in suspicion. The seductive lure to build bigger and bigger monuments, regardless the cost, has been called an “Edifice Complex,” and “if you build it, they will come,” might well serve as a theme song, in parody. The Church over the centuries has fallen prey to this sin.

That song was undoubtedly playing for our ancient ancestors at Shinar, who built

“in order to make a name for themselves.” “To build or not to build,” was indeed the question. It was the only question for a people who thought too much of themselves, and too little of their god. Their monument was designed only to appease an angry god, and to make themselves proud. This grand tower, though reaching into the heavens, pointed only to themselves.

“To build or not to build,” was the only question for those people who finally found themselves without their building, and without the community which they so desperately needed. When God came, according to the legend, the people were shattered and scattered, because what mattered the least got in the way of all that has ever mattered. Brick and mortar counts for nothing. Building community is all we have.

The story of The Tower of Babel has rightly become the quintessential critique of building programs. When you build in the wrong way, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and for the wrong reason, not only does the building itself not last, but, more frightening, the community will not either. It is a critique we must not take lightly. There is much more at stake for us in the project before us than the architectural choreography of \$1.63 million worth of construction materials. Our history and heritage, our family and faith are in the balance. “To build or not to build,” that is the question.

But it is the wrong question.

I want to summarize why I believe we ought to build. But I have always despised rhetoric, the over-blown use of language to state one’s case. So as I begin, let me reiterate a

point I made in a recent newsletter: we do not NEED a new building. Not literally. But neither do we need the ones we have. Park Road Baptist could have chosen to be a house church fifty-five years ago, and we could still meet in cell groups: twenty-five people in my house, twenty-five in yours. Imagine the money you could have saved all those years! Fifty years of utilities and roof repairs and lawn maintenance. Imagine all that you could have given, personally, directly to the poor and the needed, if there were no salaries to pay. For Amy and Anne and Jonathan and Susan and I are not needed, either. You can visit the sick and the elderly, all by yourself. You really can. You can study the Bible and learn about our faith and other faiths and share with your neighbors and teach your children and mentor your youth. You can affirm one another in marriage. You can comfort one another in death. You can sing your own praise and seek inspiration from the radio and the television. None of this is really NEEDED.

Please don't misunderstand -- I am not trying to be a smart-alec. We could still do all the Church seeks to accomplish, and for much less money, if we had no Institution to support. But, the realist in me forces me to ask the question. I do not intend it as a question of rhetoric, but a real, rubber-meets-the-road question: Would we? Would we, really? If not for the programs, the staff, the structure, the concrete, physical place to go to for sanctuary and inspiration and challenge and fellowship, would we really take care of ourselves and one another? Would we really be better followers of Jesus? It may be an unfortunate fact of human existence, but I am convinced that most human beings need structure and struc-

tures. Unfortunately, institutions cost money (too much money!), but where would we really be without them? How many people would we really have served if we had been left completely to our own devices? Let us question the institution, always. But let us believe in it as well.

A building is the product of an institution. Let us see it for what it is. Nothing more. Nothing less. It is never the question. So why build, now?

I believe the time has simply come. You have been discussing this need for more than a decade. Your patience and careful study has validated the importance of this project for this community. Timing is an essential factor for organizations. An unwillingness or inability to act in right times can change an organization's direction. It can even change the character of the organization. I believe the time has come. Let us not lose our nerve.

I believe facilities are important. Plain old brick and mortar say something about us. And you believe this too – or you would not have just renovated your kitchen or painted your den. You would not have built at the beach or bought in the mountains. Buildings do not always indicate pretentiousness. We all must judge case-by-case, but I do not believe our proposal is pretentious. If you have not attended a Wednesday night meal lately, it might be because you have attended in the past, and have decided against the frustration and bedlam! If you have not entered our campus recently with a visitor's eye, please do so. I believe in the Church. I believe in this church. I want us to thrive, not just survive. But if our facilities are the impression that people leave with (and first impressions are very im-

portant), then we are doing ourselves an injustice. I want our children to be able to go to the restroom without having to leave their own Sunday School building to do so. I want our Child Development Center to be able to host all of their children and parents and grandparent in their celebrations. I want our youth to have a space to be youth without worrying about what they might break in the process. Facilities are important. Let us not lose our nerve.

Parks Helms said in a recent meeting that this building was important because Russ and Amy “need a challenge!” Well, thanks for the encouragement, Parks! But he is right – and not just about your pastors. Some of you have never really made a commitment to your church. Yes, I’m talking about money. And our capital campaign will not be so much about money as an opportunity for spiritual growth. Let me not over-reach into the rhetorical, but how could we better prove our commitment to that which we say is most important (community, church, God), than by giving that which we treat as if it is most important, namely, our money. I am neither afraid nor embarrassed to ask you to support this project with your money – because most of us are willing to use our financial resources in much less meaningful ways.

I have never hesitated to tell you that I believe in giving. Not just giving to this church. I believe in giving. And I believe that a capital campaign can have a galvanizing effect for this community of faith. Parks is right: we need this challenge. Let us not lose our nerve.

The time has come. Facilities are important. The challenge will do us good.

If you have been skeptical, or if you still are, let me tell you that I have always been on your side. I have always sat in your seat when these arguments have been made. It is why I have not led the charge to build a new build here, until now. We ought to be skeptical of the Institution. We ought to study, thoroughly. We ought to be utterly convinced before we build. And I am. And Amy and I will support this project in every way, probably for the first time in our lives, giving to our Church in a way that will actually cost us something. The only way for us to give financially for this project is to make some decisions. As a family, it will cost us. And that will be a good thing.

And to my greatest skepticism, and yours, Jesus offers this deeply disturbing response to a woman who wasted an entire year's worth of income, pouring perfume on his head. (And she didn't even get a building, which would last for years, that could be utilized for good.) Jesus praised her generous, lavish, opulent example. Why?

Because, as I have told you before, money is just a thing. And, like a building, it has no intrinsic value. When it becomes The Question, it becomes a monument to our own glory. And these monuments will not last. Neither money nor buildings is the answer to any of the world's real problems. Only our lives, given to one another in lavish, generous, opulent ways can change the world.

"To build or not to build," is only an incidental question. What we build is all that matters. So let us build. But let us build together. And always let us build, to the Glory of God. May it be so. Amen!