

Becoming Builders
Ephesians 4: 11-13
February 7, 2026

Jesus was a builder. We know this from scripture such as Mark 6 where the villagers in Nazareth talk about him asking, "Is this not the carpenter; the son of Mary?" We might also guess this because he often uses metaphors about building as he teaches his disciples. He speaks of the wise and foolish builders, about counting the cost before beginning a construction project. He describes the human body as a temple, compares himself to the cornerstone of Psalm 118.

Building metaphors continue through the rest of the New Testament as Paul and others write about Christ, the church, and its leaders. In 1 Corinthians Paul refers to himself as "a master builder." 1 Peter describes believers as "living stones" for a spiritual house. And in Ephesians the author says the work of evangelists, teachers, and apostles is to build up the body of Christ. In fact the greek word "oikodome" or "to build up" is used forty times in the New Testament. With Jesus as its model and example, building is something the church does too.

We know this because we are surrounded by evidence of our predecessors' building enthusiasms. They bless us, they burden us, they tell us our story in stone, lumber, and brick. They tell us in the ruins of ancient monasteries, in the splendor of medieval cathedrals, in the simplicity of white clapboard meeting houses and-- closer to us in time and distance, in the sprawling campuses of the programmatic churches of the 20th century with their offices, Sunday School buildings, fellowship halls and oh lordy, their parking lots.

Someone once remarked, "Architecture is Ecclesiology". This is just a fancy way of saying that our church buildings bear silent testimony to what we believe the church is called to be and to do. Look at a building from any era of church history and you can get a good idea of what the people who worshiped there thought was the main purpose of their ministry together.

Of course oikodome, building up, does not only mean building literal buildings; much of the time in scripture the word is used to mean to build up spiritually, to encourage, to edify. That's more the meaning in today's scripture from the Letter to the Ephesians. The saints are meant to build up the body of Christ so that we might attain unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Oikodome can mean literal or spiritual building up.

But I've not ever seen in any commentary or heard in any sermon that oikodome can be translated as "prop up." Building up and propping up are not the same thing. We prop up things that are not structurally stable. Sometimes there is a good reason: it may be a temporary strategy while we figure out what to do next. But, in general, propping things up is not what the Church of Jesus Christ is called to do. We are not called to prop up traditions that no longer help us proclaim the good news. We are not called to prop up buildings that served the needs and preferences of a long gone era. And we are most definitely not called to prop up systems of

violence and oppression simply because propping them up is safer and more comfortable for us than tearing them down.

So, an important question for us to ask ourselves as we discern our future--as individual followers of Christ, as congregations of those trying to be faithful to the gospel, as networks of ministry in Presbyteries and in the PCUSA is, "What are we building up together--and what are we propping up together? Where are we about the oikodome, the building up of greater faith and knowledge of the gospel of Jesus and where are we simply trying to sustain the unsustainable?"

If we were in person today, I would have us sing one of the lesser known hymns in our Glory to God hymnal called, "O Carpenter, Why Leave the Bench?" It's a hymn that imagines a dialogue with Jesus as his work as a literal carpenter gives way to the work of building the kingdom of God. As a Jeopardy fan, I love hymns that come in the form of a question. The questions of this hymn take us deep into the discernment of what we are building up and what we are propping up. Since we cannot sing it together, I will share it as a poem.

O carpenter, why leave the bench
where wood yields to your art,
and take instead, to try your skill,
the stony human heart?

O carpenter, why leave the tools
to carry out your plans,
and go instead to do God's work
with empty, open hands?

O carpenter, why leave the world of
of table, bed, and house,
to face the empire's carpentry,
to lift a Roman cross?

O carpenter, why leave repairs
with wood and clamp and glue,
and rise from death to seek instead
to make the whole world new?

O carpenter, who else could do
the work that you have done?
What can we do but sing your praise,
O Savior, Mary's son!