

Solid Foundations – Right Building

We started last time with Peter's dramatic statement to Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" and Jesus' often-misunderstood response that "upon this rock I will build my Church", and then looked at a little of the history of God's 'called-out-people' from Exodus to Revelation, along with the unfolding realisation that we are called out not only to be his people but, more especially, to be the 'place' which he inhabits, where he makes his residence, where his presence may be found.

Now we need to look at solid foundations and, as we do that, we shall look at solid foundations in our own lives as well as solid foundations for the Church. Not surprising, really – the foundations that are in our own lives actually **are** the foundations for the Church!

The Church doesn't somehow have a separate existence on its own, which we need to 'join'. The Church **is** God's 'called-out-people', you and me, and all our brothers and sisters around the whole world. If our lives have been joined to Jesus, it is because we have heard his call and responded to it – and so, as a result, we are automatically in his Church.

Peter's response to Jesus' question had three components:

- 1) Peter had received revelation from "my Father who is in the heavens".
- 2) He had believed what he had been shown.
- 3) He spoke it out!

All of these components were needed to form the foundation in his life, and they remain essential for us today. I believe this three-fold response is the actual 'rock' on which Jesus promises to build his Church.¹

Paul describes the process in **Romans 10:8-10**: *"But what does it say? 'THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART' – that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, because if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."* Are we a little surprised by that? We usually think of our salvation being a result of faith and faith alone, don't we?

One of the earliest Bible verses that I learned was **Ephesians 2:8**: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."* If we are in Christ, at some point in our lives we have received 'revelation' which has enabled us to respond in faith. For you, it may have been very mundane and down-to-earth, or perhaps it was more dramatic – it doesn't matter! Either way, we began to see what God has done for us in Jesus. And then our response of faith was vital. Without it we would not be prepared – or even able – to truthfully say 'Jesus is my Lord'. But that same real faith has the result of making us ready to make the declaration. Experience shows that making this declaration has an effect on us as well: it seems to 'cement' our commitment. To me, it seems similar to a marriage ceremony. The ceremony does not create the loving relationship, but it does have the effect of 'firming it up'. Each partner is willing to publicly declare their love and commitment to the other. Without the declaration, the relationship may feel rather less certain. I referred to the **Romans 10** passage last week when we were about to take the bread and wine, and I believe that sharing in the Lord's Supper is another way in which we make that vital public declaration.

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¹ If you want to explore the different words that Jesus used for 'Peter' and 'rock' in this passage, plus some more Biblical references to rock and stone, see See 'Bedrock' from www.justonecandle.uk

But there is an even more fundamental foundation than our threefold response to revelation – the Lord Jesus Christ himself! Last week, we looked at **1 Peter 2:4-10** and other verses and saw how we are being built together into a spiritual house in which God wants his amazing presence to be resident, just as it was in the Old Testament tabernacle and Temple, constructed by Moses and Solomon.

Peter takes passages from the Old Testament ¹ to show that Jesus is the “*choice stone, a precious corner stone*” which God laid ‘in Zion’ (i.e. among his people) but also shows that he would be rejected by “*those who disbelieve*”. They rejected what they considered to be a very ordinary ‘stone’, but he turned out to be the vital cornerstone (literally, ‘the head of the corner’) of the whole building! A (small) stone to trip over and stumble but, even more fundamentally, a rock (literally ‘bedrock’) of offence. Tragically, this is the way that the vast majority of Jewish people view their Messiah, and Peter is writing this letter mainly to believing Jews. In the following verses (**9-10**) he re-affirms to these Jews who have accepted their Messiah that they are now the heirs of the promises made by God in the Old Testament.

In **Ephesians 2:19-22** (another passage we looked at last week), Paul also refers to the Lord Jesus as the cornerstone of the whole ‘building’ of the Church, but mentions that we/they are “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets . . .*” What does he mean? Some people have interpreted this to mean that we need present-day ‘apostles’ and that they, in themselves, should form part of the foundation of the Church locally and internationally. I believe this is dangerous and misleading. There have been too many people who have styled themselves as ‘apostles’, often initially with very good biblical teaching, but who have then wandered off into danger areas which they called ‘authority and submission’ which have drawn sincere believers away into situations in which there is control and manipulation, with a denial of the freedom to hear God’s voice for themselves. We escaped a situation like that about 40 years ago, but it seems that they may still exist. BEWARE !

We can find several links between apostles and foundations in the New Testament, but in **1 Corinthians 3:10-15**, Paul makes it clear that he **laid** a foundation there in Corinth, not that he considered himself to **be** part of that foundation!

You will remember that the believers in Corinth had started splitting into loyalty groups according to the apostle or teacher which each of them appreciated the most:– ‘Paul’s groups’, ‘Apollos’s group’, ‘Peter’s group’ and even a super-spiritual group who seemed to think that they were the only ones who were in ‘Christ’s group’.

The foundation which Paul had laid some time before was simple: “*no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ*” (**v.11**). But he was worried about what some people might be trying to build on that foundation, and warns “*each man must be careful how he builds on it*” (**v.10**).

First of all, that foundation! There is only one, which means that any ‘building’ which is based on anything other than the Lord Jesus Christ himself cannot be the Church, or part of it. Each one of the ‘living stones’ that Peter wrote about has a personal relationship with him, and is at least beginning to be ‘built into’ him as part of that ‘spiritual house’. It is simply not possible for someone to be part of the Church without that living connection to Jesus.

It is very tempting to try to include people in the hope that they will, sooner or later, come to faith in Jesus. This is a difficult point. Of course we want to befriend people and introduce them to the new life that we have begun to experience for ourselves, but we do them no favours if we let them think that they can be in some way already in the Church before they have come through that same 3-fold response which Peter made:–

¹ **Isaiah 28:16** (also quoted by Paul: **Romans 9:32-33 & 10:11**), **Psalms 118:22** (quoted by Jesus: **Matthew 21:42 & Luke 20:17**).

First, seeing, or at least beginning to see, that the answer to their need is in Jesus.
Then, believing what they have begun to realise and putting their trust in Jesus.
Speaking out, or in some other way publicly acknowledging Jesus as Lord.

Inevitably, we find this issue difficult and it is made no easier by popular ideas of what the Church is. Probably all of us have grown up with some of these ideas and it is hard to shake them off in favour of gaining a clearer, Bible-based understanding. Hopefully these studies will help us to discover more.

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Paul does not stop at just looking at the foundation; he looks at what may be built on it. Don't forget, in this passage he is looking at the tragic splitting up of the church in Corinth into 'loyalty groups', so most of these comments will be intended to try to bring them back into line, seeing **one** 'building' on **one** foundation.

He takes the long view – a very long view! First of all, he lists six types of building material which might be used in constructing a house: gold, silver, costly (or 'precious') stones, wood, hay and straw (**v.12**). Then he says that 'the day' is coming, when the nature of any person's work will be revealed, and fire is the way that it will be revealed. He is looking forward to a time when his own work and the work of others will be tested and shown to be what it really is in God's eyes – serious and scary!

For anyone who seeks to serve the Lord, there is an awesome prospect here. However successful our work may **appear** to be, fire will reveal what it is really made of. The situation there in Corinth is that Paul's own work there as an apostle is 'on the line', and so is the work of anyone else who is looking to build on the foundation Paul laid. He is not specific, but I think he is including anyone there in Corinth who sees themselves as some sort of 'builder', contributing to the growth of the church there.

We all know that three of these materials burn really well but the other three don't. How can we tell what material we are building with? How can we know whether our work will survive the judgment of fire? These materials have another quality apart from flammability . . .

Straw is fairly quick to produce and cheap, because basically it is a by-product of growing grain. Hay is also quite a quick crop, but it is a crop in its own right, valuable and needing more care and attention to get a satisfactory result. Wood takes much longer; more care, more waiting! But all of these are things that we can produce ourselves, given some time and effort.

Gold, silver and costly stones cannot be 'produced' in the same way. They are part of the creation and need to be **found**, then mined and made suitable for use, in buildings or anywhere else. They are things that God has created but has made available to the human race to discover and bring into use.

Does this give us a clue to what Paul means here? If we seek to contribute to the growth of the Church, then we need to use 'materials' which our Father has generated, not some scheme of our own which may look good and perhaps give quick results. If the 'materials' we use in building are not those which he has made and provided then, in the end, on 'the day', they will disappear to ashes from the judgment of fire.

He is not only concerned about the judgment of fire on 'the day'. There is a much more immediate danger that he can see there in Corinth. It seems that some of what was going on was actually threatening to damage the church, which he describes as the 'temple of God' – where God's presence dwells. The word translated as 'destroy' means 'spoil', 'ruin', 'corrupt'

or ‘destroy’ (**v.17**) and Paul uses it to describe both the damage caused to the church and God’s judgment on the one causing the damage!

Back in **v.15**, there is at least some consolation for the person who has worked hard but with man-made materials: their work will go up in smoke, but they at least will be saved personally, ‘yet so as through fire’. Nothing so certain for the one who causes damage to the earthly dwelling place of God – his Church!

Please don’t step back from these two aspects and think ‘Well, that’s just for those who are involved in Christian work, leaders and speakers, organisers and workers. That’s not me; I’m just an ordinary believer.’ Obviously, it does apply especially to those involved in ministry of any sort, but we are all involved to at least some degree.

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We need to heed the warnings but, on a much more positive note, let’s look at how growth and ‘building up’ in the local church works when everything is functioning as it is designed to. And, in passing, it is worth recognising that **the Lord has designed his Church to grow** continuously and be built up, not to be static but to be always moving forward.

In **Ephesians 4:11-16**, Paul describes the process. It’s worth noting that this passage is NOT suggesting that the people involved in this process are in some way perfect, but rather that this is a process that moves them (us!) forwards individually at the same time as seeing the Church built up together.

“And he gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for (literally, ‘into’) the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

So there **we all** are! The apostles and prophets are there, putting in foundations, along with evangelists, pastors and teachers, and their responsibility is to contribute to equip the ‘saints’ (that’s us) into the work of service. The aim is maturity, ‘the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’. Wow!

But see how it works: The whole body (worldwide or local) is ‘fitted and held together by what every joint supplies’ (literally ‘through every joint of the supply’) and depends on each individual part working properly (literally ‘working in measure’). Result: the body grows and is built up in love. God’s design in action!

Paul did not write this to the folks in Ephesus as some sort of theoretical letter. All of this was intensely practical for them, and they will have needed to see and receive what he wrote to them and work through it in their lives together as they discovered more of what it meant to be ‘a dwelling of God in the Spirit’ (**Ephesians 2:21-22**).

By the grace of God, we can learn to do the same.

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