

Unshakeable?

What we have been given is amazing! All too often, we miss out on the wonder and get lulled into a dull round of religious routine. That is dangerous, as we are reminded in ***Hebrews 12:25-29***.

Much of the Hebrews letter speaks of the danger of either not hearing God's voice or, worse still, refusing to listen when he does speak. Here we are reminded that, as we are receiving an unshakeable kingdom, we need to be thankful so that we can offer acceptable service to God with proper caution and fear. This is no light-hearted matter; we are dealing with the living God. We need to face it seriously.

To see some basic facts about this unshakeable kingdom and how we may offer 'acceptable service' to God, let us look at some verses in the first three chapters of ***1 Corinthians***.

Foundations of the kingdom

There are two sides to this, the negative and the positive. First, Paul insists on the fact that there is no way that human ingenuity has anything to do with new life in Christ. See ***1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16***. Some people look for well worked-out philosophy, others look for manifestations of power. The message of Christ cuts across both, seemingly foolish and weak by human standards, but wise and powerful in God's hands. The result is that human 'nothings' will shame both the wise and the strong. (***1:22-29***)

How does it work then? The power of God through declaration of the truth, bringing revelation of Jesus Christ as the source of redemption, righteousness, holiness and wisdom. (***1:21, 30***) Paul says that we have been given the Holy Spirit (who knows all God's thoughts) so that we might get to know all the things which God has given us in Christ. (***2:6-13***)

It is by God's doing that we are in Christ. (***1:30***) If we are not in Christ by God's own working, then we are not in Christ!

Disqualified by division

Having started talking about passing on spiritual wisdom to spiritually mature people, Paul then says that he cannot do that at the moment,

because the Corinthian believers are still inarticulate infants in spiritual terms! That is proved by the fact that they have jealousy, wrangling and special loyalties. (**3:1-9**)

Where does that leave us today? Honesty would force us to admit that we often declare our loyalties to individual people or man-made movements before our loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ. How often we betray our real partisan loyalties when the first question we ask when we meet another Christian is, "Where do you go to church, then?"

Paul does not suggest that the parties get together in order to promote unity. He tells them that in God's eyes, they are all God's field, his building, and that the men whose names have been used as rallying points are fellow-workers together under God. If there had been any division between Paul and Apollos, he could not have been so confident. The Corinthians needed to see that, instead of them belonging to Paul, Apollos or Peter, those men belonged to them, along with all the other things that God had given! (**3:4,9,16-17, 21-23**)

It is easy to miss in all our English translations but, in the Greek, **verse 16** says that they (plural) are a sanctuary (singular) of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in them (plural). **Verse 17** goes on to a stark warning about destroying that dwelling place of God - an obvious warning about disunity!

Lasting results

Paul is concerned about the lasting quality of the church there in Corinth. He knows that both he and Apollos have worked as the Lord has directed them, in initial church planting and development, but he seems to fear that some less reliable work may be now be going on. (**3:10-15**)

Many people have taken this passage to refer to the 'internal' results of our lives, such as how we develop as people and the sort of things that we do. But Paul is obviously writing about the visible results of the work that he and other people undertake - their 'projects', if you like - in this case, the church there in Corinth. Some of the believers were trying to build on the foundation which Paul and Apollos had laid, and it was vital that the building was of the right sort!

The important factor was what materials were to be used. Were they going to build according to human schemes, human loyalties and human wisdom? Or were they going to build with God's plans and priorities, the revelation of the Holy Spirit and real unity in Christ? Were they going to build a human empire or the kingdom of God?

The testing by fire is interesting, rather like the testing by shaking in **Hebrews 12**. The testing simply reveals the true nature of the building. If the 'materials' are spiritually real, they will stand spiritual testing, just as the gold, silver and precious stones survive fire because they were formed by fire. The difference is between 'cultivated' materials (like wood, hay and straw) and 'created' materials such as costly minerals. If we need more wood, hay or straw, it is relatively easy to go and grow some more, even if it takes some time. Not so with precious ores - there are only certain amounts of them in the world - all we can do is try to find them!

So if you are building, says Paul, first you need to know that there is only one foundation, Jesus Christ himself (**3:11**). If that foundation is missing, don't try to build! How many of our schemes and projects, though Christian in name, fail to make sure that the foundation of new life in Christ is clearly laid? However good the building, without that foundation it will fail the test of shaking or fire!

Then, make sure that you are building with God's materials. All Paul's discussion about the difference between human power and wisdom and God's way of working should have made it clear what he means. As the Lord Jesus himself said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (**John 3:6**) We need to be careful to see that spiritual growth and development is not just a matter of putting people through programmes of study or activity. These may help, but only if the Lord uses them to bring about real spiritual changes in lives.

Don't kid yourself!

Paul is concerned that some folk in Corinth will say, "Oh, don't worry so much, I know what I'm doing; I know what to do to get the church growing. If we just follow this course, or undertake that project, God is certain to bless us and we shall grow." If you are thinking like that, says Paul, then you need to go through a vital bit of 'unlearning'. All that

human 'savvy' and expertise needs to be put down, so that you can really learn God's kind of wisdom and see how he wants to build his church. (**3:18**)

Natural wisdom and methods may look good in annual reports (and may even attract enthusiasm and financial support) but they are foolish in God's eyes. (**3:19,20**)

Promoting special loyalty to particular leaders puts things back to front. We do not belong to them (or their 'movement'), but they belong to us if they belong to Christ. (**3:21-23**)

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Yes, we shall inherit a kingdom that cannot be shaken, when the kingdom of this world becomes "the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (**Revelation 11:15**). But we also are receiving it now, as we begin to see the Lord forming and building his church, the foretaste of the revelation of the kingdom of God on earth! Let us receive it with thanks, being careful to offer "acceptable service with reverence and awe." (**Hebrews 12:28,29**)

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There are many passages about the church in the New Testament, but here are two brief 'snapshots' by Paul:-

"Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension"

(**1 Timothy 2:8**)

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit"

(**Ephesians 2:19-22**)

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