

GOD'S BUILDERS

by Ray C. Stedman

Several weeks ago I was down in Austin, Texas, where I was privileged to dedicate a new building for the Grace Community Church there. It was an exciting time as we gathered to set this new building aside for God's purposes, and yet I tried to seize the occasion to point out what they well knew, that a church is not a building, and buildings do not really represent the church as such.

A church is people, not buildings, and, though the building was beautiful, useful and necessary in the carrying out of the program that God has given their church, it was not what our Lord had in mind when he said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," {Matt 16:18 KJV}. Jesus, of course, meant the people, and the remarkable thing about the church is that it is a growing building, growing through the centuries, made up of people whom Peter calls "living stones" {1 Pet 2:5} who are built into this mighty temple of God.

The concepts of the church that you run into as you travel around the country are amazing. I was in Alabama some time ago and I saw a church with a big sign in front that said, "This church is the only authorized spokesman of Jesus Christ on earth." Now you run into that "we are the people" mentality every now and then. Somehow {in} every generation somebody thinks, "We are the true church, we are the pure church, and everyone else is wrong." Even whole denominations can get that mentality, but that, of course, is a violation of what the Scriptures tell us about the church. Why, just this last week I heard of a church in Ohio that had as its name out in front, "The Original Church of God, No. 2."

A building, however, is a very good symbol for the church, and Scripture uses it this way. Our Lord is building his church which he started back in the first century when the foundations were laid. That building has been going on, stretching through the centuries ever since and now, perhaps, we are finishing off the roof. The building is almost complete, it seems to me, but it is one building, one church.

Paul describes this now in this section in First Corinthians 3, Verse 10:

According to the commission of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it. For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. {1 Cor 3:10-11 RSV}

What a strange building the church is! It is not made of wood, or of stone, least of all of glass. It is made of people, and it consists of an invisible union among visible people, so in some sense the church is both visible and invisible. You can see the church because the people of God gather in one place, and yet you cannot see the church because it is made up of only that spiritually-wrought tie that binds us together in sharing the life of Christ. That constitutes the church.

That union is manifest in three distinctive ways:

1. First, we can refer to the church as the total union of all believers of all time, both on earth and in heaven, and there are references to that church in Scripture. Paul speaks of the church in that regard largely in Ephesians where you have the picture of the whole temple of God in which God dwells.
2. Then, of course, there is the manifestation of that church as the local congregation. We are meeting here this morning as a congregation. Already another congregation, or part of this congregation, has met in these buildings at the 8:15 hour. We are parts of them; we belong together; we are all one congregation, and yet we meet at separate times and sometimes in separate places as well. In this sense, the church consists of any two or three Christians gathered in the name of the Lord. Jesus said,

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them," {Matt 18:20}.

3. It can include a home church, and yet it deserves and properly has the name of a church because it is a manifestation of this strange living union that our Lord is talking about. Every congregation is that kind of a church. Still further, as this letter makes clear, there is a sense in which every individual believer among us is a picture of that church. Paul will say in the sixth chapter of this letter, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" {1 Cor 6:19a RSV}. "You are not your own; you were bought with a price," {1 Cor 6:19c-20a RSV}. In that sense every individual one of us is a church, a dwelling place of God by the Spirit, so when Scripture speaks of the church it has all three of these in mind.

Now, in all or any of these manifestations the matter of first importance is the foundation. A church, or a building, is no good if the foundation is no good, and in this case the apostle is very clear to make sure that we understand who that foundation is. He does not leave it to debate; we do not have to argue about it; it is stated as plainly as it can be. Verse 11:

**For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.
{1 Cor 3:11 RSV}**

His person, his life, his doctrines, his teachings, his resurrection, his ascension, his return by means of the Holy Spirit to make himself universally available among us, his coming return in person from heaven -- all that is included as part of the foundation. The teachings concerning Jesus were given to us by the apostles, but they focus on the person of the Lord. Every church that departs from teaching about Christ and his work, his person and his resurrection, begins to slide away from the foundation and soon becomes tottery and wobbly. It becomes filled with many forms of weakness and failure and finally collapses and crumbles into nothing. Every individual who is not built upon that foundation will find his life crumbling and failing ultimately. So our Lord is to remain always present as the foundation of the church, the God and Lord of the universal church, the head of the local body manifesting his presence, his power and his guidance throughout that body and the Master and Savior of every individual heart which has come to know him. That is the foundation.

That foundation, of course, basically consists of the Scriptures. They are the foundation of the church. They were given to us by the apostles and as such they constitute the unshakeable foundation. That is why every church, either local or universal, or any individual who does not base his life upon the Scriptures soon begins to waver and wobble; they find inconsistencies and weaknesses. Today we hear the words "Jesus" and "Christ" used in many ways that are not reflected in the Scriptures, but the only foundation that God ever recognizes is the apostolic Christ, the one given to us, the Jesus who is reflected in the Scriptures. "No other foundation can any one lay," Paul says. That is the foundation, and this is why we must keep Jesus central in all things.

Paul calls himself here "the wise master builder," and the word for master builder, *architecton* is the word from which we get our word "architect." But he really uses this word in a different sense than we use the word "architect" today. To us an architect is the man who thinks up the building. He conceptualizes it; he designs it; he sees it in his mind's eye; he plans it, and programs it, and draws the designs for it. In that sense, of course, God is the architect of the church. The Lord Jesus said, "I will build my church," {Matt 16:18}. He has conceived it; he has designed it; he has planned its structure; he has programmed its activities, and he continues to do so, so he is really the architect in that sense today.

The term I think we would use to describe what Paul speaks of here is "contractor." Paul is a master contractor. He is skilled; he knows his business; he is filled with grace; he is helped by the power and the Spirit of God. As such he comes equipped to go to work and lay the foundation as he did in Corinth and everywhere else he went, preaching and teaching the doctrines of Christ.

I do not know what your vision of a preacher is today. Most of us think of a preacher as an individual who goes about with a dark suit on who has an unclear mind and speaks with a holy groan in everything he says. I have always disliked dark suits for that very reason. I find them a badge of the contemporary idea of what a preacher is. I think we would get much closer to it if we would think of a preacher as a man who wears a hard

hat and a carpenter's apron and has a saw and a hammer in his hand. He is building something.

That was what Paul was doing -- he was building. By the preaching and the teaching of the doctrines of Christ and enabling people to practice these he, together with the other apostles, lays the foundation of the Church.

Now the purpose of a foundation, as Paul makes clear, is to build something on. You do not lay foundations and then walk off and leave them. If you do, it is a sign you have run out of money; you are not able to finish what you have started, and God does not do that. As the apostles laid the foundations in giving us the Scriptures in the first century, they gave them that they might be built upon, and the church rises upon that foundation. As others are added to it, and as they grow and develop and become mature and strong in Christ, love and compassion, mercy, truth and grace begin to flow out of their lives instead of confusion, weakness, hostility and anger and all the things that were once there.

So the church begins to rise and take shape and form. But who builds upon the foundation? Paul says, "I laid a foundation, and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it." Obviously he has in mind Apollos and Cephas and some of the other teachers whom he does not list by name in the church at Corinth. There probably were many there who were teaching and preaching the doctrines of Christ and thus building on the foundation of personal faith in Jesus Christ which the apostle had laid. But this would also apply to almost any Christian, because we are all working with each other. There is a sense in which we disciple one another. Nobody is the discipler and somebody else the "disciplee." I have learned when I take on a young man to train or disciple that it is not very long before he will start discipling me as well. He will have insights and understanding in the Scripture that I need, and so we begin to build into one another's life. The great question that Paul raises here is, "What are you doing to one another as you build into one another's life? They have an affect on you; you have an impact upon them." Everyone is faced with this great question here, "What is my impact? What am I building with? What kind of material am I putting into another person's life?"

Paul gives us the choices in Verse 12:

Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble -- each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.
{1 Cor 3:12-13 RSV}

Each one of us has an influence on somebody else in the body of Christ. It may be on our children, on our parents, on our friends, on our companions, on our wives, on our husbands. We are building upon the foundation which has been laid in their lives. "What are you building with?" That is the great question.

There are two types of material:

One is permanent -- gold, silver, costly stones. When it says "precious stones" I do not think Paul means jewels like rubies, diamonds, emeralds, etc. The word really refers to those large foundation stones carved out of granite or marble that could be put upon the foundation to raise the walls and complete the edifice. They were costly stones because they required a great deal of work in quarrying and shaping and fitting them into the place where they ought to be. That is what Paul has in mind. The thing that is characteristic about all of these materials is that they withstand the fire. Gold and silver and costly stones are permanent; they are abiding; they never fail; they do not slip off the foundation; they are in line with the nature of the foundation.

The other three, of course, are exactly the opposite. They are highly combustible material -- wood and hay and straw ("stubble," the King James Version calls it). And what is this? Well, this is something that is very temporary. Wood can make an impressive structure, but when it is beset by fire it does not last very long. Wind can blow it down, fire can burn it, attacks using metal implements against it can cut it and destroy it, so a wood building is not very enduring.

These are symbols, but what do they refer to? What is the permanent material upon which we can build in each other's lives as opposed to the perishable, the temporary, that soon passes away?

I do not think we have to debate that. It is what Paul has been talking about all through this whole section. The permanent is that secret and hidden wisdom of God which he said was, "decreed before the ages for our glorification" {1 Cor 2:7b RSV}, and is revealed only by the Spirit through the Scriptures. It is that whole realm of knowledge about ourselves, about God, about the world, about life, about history, those insights that only God has which are exactly the opposite of the world around, and, therefore, are enduring and permanent. If we build on each other's lives on the basis of that philosophy, what we build will endure the test of the fire.

But on the other hand, the perishable is the "wisdom of the world" {cf, 1 Cor 2:6 KJV}, as Paul calls it, the wisdom of words, the speculations and traditions, the changing philosophies of men.

Every person, as he begins to think about himself, sooner or later comes up with the same question, "Who am I?" Have you ever faced that? Of course you have. "Who am I? Why am I made this way, with this name and this color skin, and why have I appeared in history at this point? What is it all about? What am I supposed to do?" Young men are wrestling with this all the time. These are the fundamental, basic questions of life, and as people ask these questions, they begin to come up with answers.

- Someone says, "Well, I'm here to enjoy myself. The purpose of life is to have fun and live with gusto and pleasure and enjoy yourself."
- Another says, "No, I've tried that but it doesn't satisfy. I've been living like that and my life is empty and dreary and filled with misery. That isn't the answer."
- So someone comes up with another answer and they say, "Well, life consists then of hard work and achievement, how high you can get in life and how many people will acknowledge your prowess and your ability."
- But someone else says, "No, I've tried that and that doesn't work."

Soon you get the speculations of men growing into the philosophies of life. One contradicts another, and then people begin to speculate upon the speculations, and one will say, "This one is wrong and that one is right." But the other will say, "No, this one is right and that one is wrong," and soon you hear all these conflicting voices and you say, "I don't know what is right. I don't know who is right," and these become the shifting, impermanent, transitory, ephemeral philosophies of men. If you try to build your life on them, they will all disappear overnight. Nothing abides; nothing lasts.

But, if, on the other hand, you listen to the wisdom of God... What Paul has been saying to us all along is, "God hears all these questions that men are asking, and God is saying, in effect, "Look, if you will just shut up for a minute I'll tell you who you are. I know who you are. I made you. I know what you're for. I designed it. I know what you can do, and how you fit, and if you'll listen I'll tell you. You'll not only find out who you are, you'll find out who I am, and you'll discover that you can't find out who you are until you know who I am. I'm behind all things. I've brought all things into being and all things function within my will and purpose. All things will end in the objectives that I have set up. You can find yourself when you find me." That is what God is talking about.

This morning we prayed about five families in our congregation whose marriages are threatened. Why are they threatened? Well, because they are all part of the conflicting philosophies of marriage that are abroad today. They have all partaken to one degree or another of the current changing ideas of the spirit of the age: "What is marriage? Well, it is a way of enjoying yourself with another person. It is designed for sexual satisfaction. It is having somebody meet your needs. Marriage is being in love and being happy together, and if you are not happy or you are not in love any more, then forget it and marry someone else." That is why marriages are crumbling. They reveal what this very passage is telling us -- that *that* is impermanent, it does not last, it crumbles and falls. It is improper material to build upon the foundation.

What lasts? God's insights into marriage, God's understanding of what two people becoming one flesh requires, how to go about it, and of how to lay hold of power and resources available that make you able to do even certain things you do not want to do. That is the secret and hidden wisdom of God. Without it marriages

break up, churches fall apart, split and divide and individual lives grow cold, lonely, despairing, unhappy and miserable.

As you read this you can see how clearly Paul properly describes that wisdom as "gold, silver and precious stones" that remain permanent, solid and sure.

What Paul is asking us is, "You who preach and teach in this church" (including me), "what is the source of your teaching? Are you understanding these great secrets of God revealed through the Spirit, and do you reflect them in your teaching of the doctrines of Christ? Are you understanding that man is not to be exalted and made much of and concern himself about status and titles, degrees and traditions and rituals, etc.? Has the word of the cross come to you, the word that cuts underneath all human attainment and sets it aside and causes you in fear and trembling to try to describe what God is ready to do in our midst, not how much we can impress others with what we are going to do for God?" That is the "word of wisdom." That is the "gold, silver and precious stones." This is what will endure and build up the church in a way that will last from age to age.

Do you know what we really want?

I will tell you what I want. I want to find a way by which I can indulge in all the love and pleasure of the flesh, to give way to my temper and to my desires for acquisition of comfortable things, to enjoy life to the full with all its pleasures and still, at the same time, have the compassionate heart and the loving, joyful, peaceful, serene spirit that constitutes a Christian who is walking in the power of God.

Isn't that what you want? Sure you do.

You do not need to look so pious. I know it is. But do you see what the apostle is saying? It is one *or* the other. If you are not building with gold, silver and precious stones into another person's life, you are building with wood, hay and stubble. There are no other choices. There is nothing in between. It is one or the other -- either the foolishness of man or the wisdom of God. That is why Paul says you must "take care" how you build in the church. What are you doing to others?

Now, why? Well, Paul gives us as the motivation for this the fact that examination day is coming.

Next week is examination week in the schools here. Many of these young people here know it, and they are acting differently. They are saying, "No," to some of the invitations to go to the beach, or to spend their time with their friends. They are getting out the books and digging into them, trying to find out what they should have been learning all year. Why? Because examination time is coming. It is going to be revealed soon what they know and what they do not know, and they are either going to face the joy of having passed with superlative honors or they are going to be sorry, ashamed and disgraced by having failed.

That is what Paul says is true here, Verse 14:

If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. {1 Cor 3:14-15 RSV}

What do these mean? I can only touch upon them very briefly.

Remember how, in Second Corinthians, Paul says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" {2 Cor 5:10}, and in John's book of Revelation he describes the Lord before whom we appear? Remember what John says, "His eyes are like a flame of fire," {Rev 1:14}. Those flaming, searching eyes are going to examine all our Christian lives, what they have been made of, what we are building with. Paul says in Second Corinthians, "Then we shall receive the things done in the body whether they be good or bad" {cf, 2 Cor 5:10} -- the same two categories -- whether they be built on the basis of the revelation of the mind and Spirit of God, gold, silver and precious stones, or whether they reflect the current philosophies of the spirit of the age around us.

What are we building with? One or the other. If it is good it will endure; it will stand the test, and we will be given a reward.

What is the reward?

Do you know what I think it is? There are a lot of guesses as to what this is because the Scriptures do not tell us flat out, but I think there are hints that indicate what it is. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians he said, "Are you not our crown of rejoicing?" {1 Th 2:19 KJV}. I think the reward is simply joy, joy over having spent your life in a way that counts.

Did you ever watch a winning team at the end of a game? Do you notice what they do? Why, they go crazy! Grown men jump on each other's backs; they pound one another, and hug one another, and even kiss one another. They jump up and down like little kids in a candy store. Why? They are filled with joy because the efforts they put forth produced results; it was satisfying to them. That was their reward.

Did you ever watch the losing team? They slink off; there is no jumping around and slapping one another on the back. No. Sadness and gloom prevail; they are ashamed because all their efforts were to no avail. It was all wasted effort.

Now, all of us shall have some of both in our lives. There is nobody who is a Christian who will not have some degree of gold, silver and precious stones because God guarantees it by having come into our lives as Christians. But there can also be a lot of wood, hay and stubble too, built upon the philosophy of the flesh instead of the Spirit. John says, "Let us so live that we shall not be ashamed before him at his coming," {cf, 1Jn 2:28}.

What is your life going to count for?

That is the question. Every one of us here is investing his life in something. You cannot live without making an investment. What is it in? Will it be permanent? Will it abide? Will it stand the test? In the great day when all the universe sees things the way they are, will you be filled with joy that your life was invested in what stood the test and contributed to the glory of the Lord himself? Or will you be ashamed that you wasted all these years making an impression on men and teaching and influencing others to do so, and it was all burned up in the fire -- saved, but as though you had to run through the flames and lost everything besides?

I know there are people who do not like this kind of preaching. They say we ought to all preach the grace of God, but the Scriptures teach us that we have some choice in this matter.

Are our lives going to be lived on the basis of gold, silver and precious stones, growing out of that revelation of God by the Spirit, or are they going to reflect the empty, vain philosophies and speculations of the world around so that we live only for pleasure, fame and power instead of being an instrument of the living God?

Martha Snell Nicholson has put it in this little poem with which I close:

When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ
And He shows me His plan for me,
The plan of my life as it might have been
Had He had His way, and I see

How I blocked Him here, and I checked Him there,
And I would not yield my will
Will there be grief in my Saviour's eyes,
Grief, though He loves me still?

He would have me rich, and I stand there poor,
Stripped of all but His grace,
While memory runs like a hunted thing
Down the paths I cannot retrace.

Then my desolate heart will well-nigh break
With the tears that I cannot shed;
I shall cover my face with my empty hands,
I shall bow my uncrowned head...

Lord of the years that are left to me,
I give them to Thy hand;
Take me and break me, mould me to
The pattern Thou hast planned!

Prayer

Lord, we know that these words, sobering and searching as they are, have never been sent to us to condemn us, but to encourage us to chose the right and to invest ourselves in ways that will fulfill the promise that you have given us. They will help us to discover the wholeness of our life, heal the hurts of our relationships, and make us loving, compassionate, merciful, serene and joyful Christians who have found the answers to life in your Word. Help us to manifest this increasingly as we go on day by day, guided and guarded by your Spirit, in Jesus name, Amen.

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