

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (29-11-1998 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Introduction

The Corinthian church was full of problems. Many of the members were still spiritual babies. They seemed to think more of men than of God. They were always comparing and contrasting one against another. Paul urges them to get everything in proportion. The men were merely the planters and waterers in Christian work, only servants. The work is God's. It is He who raises up men, gives gifts, assigns tasks, gives the increase, and distributes rewards.

Up to now Paul has used the metaphor of a field on a farm to describe the roles of the teachers and preachers in the church. But in these verses Paul changes the metaphor and moves from agriculture to architecture, from farm to building, from planting seeds to laying foundations. A building has to have the right foundation. Then follows the superstructure. It is important that the superstructure is made of right material, because testing time is coming. Hence Paul's concern for the quality of their lives and service. Very important that God's work is done for God's glory.

The foundation of the building

**By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it** (1 Corinthians 3:10). Once again, the stress is on the grace of God and the dependence he has on it. This word puts men in their place and lifts up God – He commissions us and enables us to build. The task and the blessing come from God.

Paul presents himself as an expert builder. The Greek *αρχιτεκτων*, is not strictly our "architect", but the man who superintended the whole operation. Not just drawing up the plans, but the project manager and supervisor. Others build on the foundation and therefore it is important that it is the right foundation and according to God's specifications. Building requires the skill and craftsmanship of others who are fellow workers. But got to begin with the right foundation. If it does not begin properly, everything else is a complete waste of time and therefore will end in disaster. Cf. Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, about the house which stood firm in the storm because it had a rock foundation, and the house that collapsed because it was built on sand.

The foundation in Christian lives and Christian churches is vital. That foundation is Jesus Christ. "Christ and Him crucified", cf. the evangelistic addresses given by the apostles, recorded in Acts, where the focus, foundation and heart was Christ Jesus, who He was, and what He has done for us, and how we should respond.

*"What think you of Christ? Is the test  
To try both your state and your scheme.  
You cannot be right in the next  
Unless you think rightly of Him"*

(John Newton)

The foundation is usually buried out of sight, yet it is the most important part. If not properly done, the rest will collapse. The foundation has to carry the whole edifice. So we must be clear about the basic facts concerning Christ, as Scripture reveals Him – fully God and fully man, born of a virgin, sinless life, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for sins on cross, raised bodily on the third day, exalted to God's Right hand in glory, one day visibly to return to be judge of all the earth. He is the only foundation for life. Only through Him can we be right with God, find peace with Him, eternal life, heaven, meaning to life, confidence in death, life useful and pleasing to God while on earth.

There can be such confusion here – some people build life on church religious practices or ritual, the writings of a man, a religious leader, on themselves or their parents, on their social set. But none of these will do. There is only one foundation – one that God has provided and the only one of any value and stability in time or eternity. If we build on any other than Christ Himself, life is wasted and will end in disaster.

How careful we should be about this in our lives, teaching, witnessing and preaching. Not here to preach politics or philosophical social values. Christianity is Christ. In Wesley's journal he recorded various times that he went to one town or another "to offer them Christ". Christ is the jewel in the casket. Patiently and carefully make sure foundation of lives and church and service is Christ Jesus. No short cuts. Never be deflected or sidetracked about this. Never allow anyone to question or tamper with this foundation. Any attack on or belittling of the person and work of Christ is an assault on the foundation of Christian church. Any church not built on this foundation is no true church. God's work is to be done in God's way.

Everyone is building their life on a foundation – either Christ or something else. When you ask yourself this, you will know at once whether you are a Christian or not. Are you building on the only one foundation God will accept and will do for time and eternity?

#### The superstructure of the building

Paul, in commencing Christian work in Corinth, was concerned that the right foundation should be laid. But others were going to follow him, like Apollus and other teachers and various church leaders. If he had planted, others would water. So it was also important to Paul that the right materials were used in the actual building itself or superstructure. Therefore he was concerned about the qualities of teaching, life and service of those who followed him in the work. He presses on them their individual responsibility. They would need to be careful how they build.

In the first century, various materials were used for building. The hovels of the poor were made from scraps of timber, walls of hardened mud, and thatched with straw. Carelessly flung together with whatever rough material was to hand. But magnificent public buildings and grand temples were made of gold, silver and precious stones. Fixed to marble and granite imported from distant quarries. Carefully designed and constructed to make attractive durable structures.

Paul's plea is that Christian work and life must not be like wretched mud hovel which would not last long, but a beautiful palace, splendid in appearance that will be long lasting.

There are various applications of this teaching to the life and leadership which is found in the church. Primarily it has relevance to those who teach and preach and counsel and advise and witness. People need the whole counsel of God presented in clear and balanced way. The preacher must ensure his message is not part commentary or social debate, but whole word of God in its complete range. It is not about him riding his hobbyhorses to death, nor picking and choosing what he likes and passing over issues he is not comfortable with or are difficult for him. Value of expository preaching – only way to produce balanced and well informed Christians, equipped to face heresies and cults. Scripture in whole range - Old and New Testaments - stories, doctrines, psalms, letters, proverbs, ethical teaching and prophecy. Facing all and shirking nothing. See whole sweep of Scriptures- delivered from one-sidedness and fanaticism.

But this picture of the church as a building with foundation on Christ also has relevance to others besides the preacher. It teaches us all that it is vital to have knowledge of Scripture in balanced way, to influence the advice we give, the conversations we have and the instruction we pass on. In every aspect of our every day lives, we are all either building up or pulling down the whole time. We cannot separate teaching and instruction from the lives we live. Our lives are either visual aids, illustrating all we preach and teach, or else our witness is pulling down and destroying the claims we make.

This challenges us to live lives in the will of God and according to the purposes and plans of God, for His praise and glory. Requires careful walk with God, prayerful submission to Him and sacrificial and costly obedience. It costs to live out and out for God – cost in time, spiritual warfare, prayer and self-centred plans and self-directed efforts. And yet these costs produce the best material. Sadly, we also use shoddy material. Too often it is easier to go the way of compromise, half-heartedness and casualness. We may impress others, at least for a while, when we back it up with all pious and pleasant jargon. But God who sees and knows all is not impressed. We achieve nothing of lasting worth.

Child's chorus of past generation, simple words, easy actions, but carrying serious message:

*“We are building day by day  
In our work and in our play.  
Not with hammer blow on blow,  
Not with timber sawing so.  
Building a house not made with hands  
Little builders all are we,  
Building for eternity.”*

We either use the materials provided by the Word and the Spirit, or else we rely on our own resources – for our own benefit and glory.

### Testing of the building

Quality of materials – lives and teaching and service – one day revealed to be what it really is. The day of Christ's Second Coming will make clear the quality of our teaching, lives and service. The second coming will not only mean joy for believers but also judgement of their work. **For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad** (2 Corinthians 5:10). This judgement is not concerned with salvation. The Christian is safe. His sins are forgiven. He is in the family of God. He is under no condemnation. But his teaching, life and service will be assessed. **It will be revealed with fire** (1 Corinthians 3:13). This is not a reference to Purgatory. It is not man that is going to be cleansed by fire, but his works to be tested by fire. Not penal or disciplinary. No reference to states between death and judgement.

Fire will burn out the dross and leave behind pure material. Work which stands the test and is shown to be true will be rewarded. Other work to be burnt to ashes. **His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light.** C.f. in 146BC the Romans captured and burnt Corinth. Most of it was burnt to the ground. Cheap fragile huts in which most people lived were burnt to ashes very quickly. But the stone temples and public buildings withstood flames and were only blackened by the smoke. So the fire showed up what was temporary and tawdry, and what was permanent and enduring.

Likewise the fire of God's searching will consume cheap and worthless works and at the same time leave genuine solid enduring works unscathed and untouched. The issue is quality not quantity. So often our attention is taken by the church that is a beehive of activity, always on the go, got something on every night of the week. But it is not the amount of work, but the quality of work which matters. More important than the amount of activity within a church are the questions: Are they working in the will of the Lord? Are they working for the glory of God? Are they spiritual in nature? Are the works done with thoroughness and reliability? Are they feeding sheep or just entertaining goats?

Some believers are going to be found very wanting in that day. Saved, but only just. Saved by the skin of their teeth. Saved so as by fire, i.e. through fire. Like a man dashing to safety through flames, but losing possessions, such believers will suffer loss. Not lose salvation, but lose reward. Just saved and nothing more. C.f. workmen fined for poor workmanship, and therefore losing some of their wages.

### Conclusion

Very serious subject for believers. Comparison is not between the saved and the lost, but between saved and saved. Have you built well since becoming a Christian, or have you built poorly? There will be no chance after this life to build again. Work is often mixed in quality. Will you have the sadness of seeing much of your work burnt up? Have you infact used bad and shoddy materials, even though men may have thanked and praised you? Much of time and energy is wasted because of this.

It is right and good to rejoice in the salvation in Christ. **Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life** (John 5:24). But we must take very seriously the quality of our lives and service. God is passionately concerned for His building, the church, His temple. The Spirit dwells in it, and in each local church. It is an amazing privilege to serve the King of Kings and Lord of glory. Astonishing that the eternal God should take us and employ us as His instruments. The sheer wonder of it all. He deserves our very best materials in His building.