

Sunday 31 January 2010 10.30 a.m.

Discipleship 2010: BUILDING, OUTREACH, BELONGING. X05

JANUARY: THE FOUNDATION: *Building with straw?*

REFERENCES: *1 Corinthians 3vv10-23, 1Cor 1 vv26-27*

We continue our 2010 theme of Building, Outreach, Belonging, and this month we are looking at foundations:

1 Corinthians 3 vv10-23

¹⁰By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

¹⁶Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

¹⁸Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"^[a]; ²⁰and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."^[b] ²¹So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas^[c] or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God

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While Paul was based in Ephesus, he kept in touch with the churches he had planted in the province of Achaia, one of which was the church at Corinth.

In some ways, the church community in Corinth was a very modern church! It was set in a large and successful city: a port, and a centre of the trading world. Corinthians were seen as educated, cosmopolitan, savvy, successful - though of course not everyone in the whole city was successful(!) - Paul makes the point:

26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.. 1Cor 1 vv26-27

As Paul wrote: God has called his church not by selecting only the wisest and cleverest people (though some of his people are indeed very wise and extremely well educated), not by inviting the richest and most celebrated (though there are both millionaires and celebrities in the worldwide church we are part of), and not by focusing on the movers and shakers in society: God chose people of faith, people who would be wholehearted. People who would demonstrate His grace!

Paul was concerned about the church in Corinth: the Christians there had only a little background teaching in matters of faith, and they didn't have the stability and consistency that was the heritage of the Christians in some of the other churches who came from a background of Judaism. The Christian leaders at Corinth even sent him a letter, full of questions, the kind of questions that he had expected them to know how to answer, themselves.

One of the first issues that Paul had to face when he went to visit this church was that the church had somehow become divided into groups, each of which followed their "favourite" minister (have you ever been in a church like that?): in Corinth the divide was primarily between Apollos, and Paul. Apollos, who was originally from the region of Alexandria, became a follower of John the Baptist and gave his life to preaching the good news of Christ. Paul met him first in Ephesus. Paul's friends Pricilla and Aquila heard Apollos preach, and mentored him for a period. He was later sent out by the churches to Corinth as an evangelist and teacher, and became a close friend and colleague to Paul. Were they very different? Did some people find Apollos inspiring, and Paul less inspiring? Did some people appreciate Paul's teaching (he was trained as a Rabbi) , and find Apollos too shallow? We may never find out.

The root of the problem was that people became focused on "their" preacher: Paul – Apollos – Peter (Cephas) – whoever! instead of basing their faith squarely on the teaching of Christ. It's always easier to follow a lively speaker, or a crowd-pulling evangelist or musician, isn't it? Easier to open the daily notes someone else has written, or to turn on the radio, as I rush around getting ready for work in the morning instead of sitting down and opening my Bible, and reading it, and working out for myself, how my faith relates to my daily life, and what God is saying to me. Now, I'm not knocking the daily notes – or the radio – both of them help and inspire me more often than I could say! But how often do you – or I - sit down with our Bibles, alone or with a friend, and try figure out what God is saying, *without the pre- prepared commentary*? Do you - or I – actually give God the chance to anchor our faith in Himself?

There's been some theological discussion about the reason that Paul is underlining the supremacy of Christ as the foundation of the building: did some of the Christians try to make Peter the basis of their community because they were following the idea of Peter as the Rock on which Jesus would build his worldwide church? Whether that was the reason or not, Paul very definitely places the emphasis on Christ as the only foundation.

Why? I can think of several reasons: perhaps you can add more?

1. Unity: If we all build on the same foundation we will all build the same building. Paul isn't saying that there is no other foundation that people build on. But he is saying that by definition, the church is built on Christ. Christians are followers of Christ and our faith and our future are invested in Him.
2. Diversity: There is one foundation - Christ. But there are many roles – each one has their own job to do, and we work together, for God's glory. Everyone is needed. Everyone is valued.
3. Design: The church is intended to be built of Christ, just as sky-scrapers are intended to be built with the specified materials. As Neil will tell you, it's no use cutting corners, or deciding not to follow the plans: disaster will surely follow (and has, sometimes in the past). Next week some of us are going to tour the Olympic site and see the new structures there. The plans for those buildings are phenomenal! But the buildings will not come out right – and may not even be safe, unless the builders follow the plans exactly.

Paul goes further, and says that even the way we build on that foundation will surely be tested: and that fire will test the quality of our work:

¹²If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

It's a sobering thought, isn't it? You know - there are some preachers out there who will try to persuade you that if you just turn to Christ and obey God, all of life will work out smoothly, your business will succeed, and your children will get on in life. Without a doubt. It's a nice thought! Sadly, that isn't what the Bible actually says.

What the Bible does say is this.

1) We and our life work will be tested – with “fire”. That's right – the heat will come. And it will test our mettle. If we have built well on that foundation of Christ, we'll receive a reward. Despite the difficulties, the pain, the fight. If we have not built well on that foundation, the work and investment may not survive. But we ourselves will not be rejected or destroyed.

2) if anyone tries to destroy us, God will come after him:

¹⁶Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

Think of a tiger, or a grizzly bear with cubs, or a lion cub. That sweet little fuzzy little cub, it-can't-hurt me. And then think of its large full-grown sabre-toothed or –clawed mother. That's how God feels about you, and about me! Zechariah 2 v 8 says that whoever touches God's people touches the apple of his eye. “OK ! Would YOU like to go and poke God in the eye and see what happens!” ??– I think not.

¹⁴If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Isn't that amazing? If I am building on the foundation of Christ – even if my work is not the highest quality - I will still be saved. God accepts me *unconditionally*. I don't get rejected if my work is not

good enough. The work gets tested, yes – but I am already accepted, whether I can deliver the goods or not! These expectations are not used as a filter, to shut me out.

Having said that - it still wouldn't make sense to be careless about how I live as a Christian: who wants to lose everything, like someone narrowly escaping from a house fire? Not me.

Finally: a warning.

¹⁸Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"^[a]; ²⁰and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."^[b] ²¹So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas^[c] or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God

As we try to relate to people around us and to make them feel welcome we sometimes think we can “dress up” our faith with outside values, to make it seem more relatable, more like the values and systems we are placed in at work, or at home. Wrong. Sorry – it doesn't work. Here's why:

¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"^[a]; ²⁰and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."^[b]

In the end, there will always be people who do not understand, or who want to make us live by their values, because living with difference can be quite uncomfortable: Paul is very clear about this. He also knows that the values and opinions of the societies we live in will not have the answers before God. I'm not saying we shouldn't be rooted in our own culture: we definitely should! How else would we share the distinctive way of our life? But the inner life – the way of seeing things – and people - and resources – will be different.

"The world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God"

Preacher: Becca Suknenko.

**** PRAY ****