

Laying a Good Foundation

In describing the initial requirements of an obedient believer in Christ, the Apostle speaks of laying a foundation:

“Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on to full growth: not laying again *the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith* towards God” (Heb. 6:1).

The things concerning Repentance and Faith are therefore part of what we call the First Principles of the doctrine of Christ, and constitute a foundation upon which the rest of the believer’s life is built. The language here is descriptive of the process by which a building is erected, with the foundation being laid, and the building itself constructed upon that foundation – in fact, it is the language used in our reading for today (Ezra 3 & 4) for the building of the House of God.

Ezra chapter 3 describes the reinstatement of worship in Jerusalem by the exiles who had returned from the lands of dispersion at the command of Cyrus the Persian, and the things described here contain many principles and lessons for the believer in Christ today. Firstly, we read that: “when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together *as one man* to Jerusalem.” Here we have described an ideal state of fellowship, with individual members collectively forming a single body of people, all with the sole purpose of worshipping together before Yahweh. This is a good starting point for any work in the Truth - for those taking part to be united together. The New Testament speaks of the body of Christ similarly: “he is the head of the body, the ecclesia” (Col. 1:18). Again: “as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12).

It is interesting to note that the very work in which the Body of Israel were engaged, in building the House itself showed the principle of unity: the individual stones used to erect the Temple foreshadowed the individuals who make up the spiritual House of God: “ye also *as lively stones* are built up *a spiritual house* ...” (1 Pet. 2:5). Notice the point again: many constituent parts of a single whole.

The point goes deeper than this, however. Israel’s enemies made the complaint before the king that: ... the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations” (Ezra 4:12). The marginal rendering for “*joined*” is “*sewed together*”, and from what we are told, the Hebrew signifies to *bind together with a cord*. Quite how this worked in terms of the practical aspect of building is beyond the present writer’s knowledge, but the language used here is picked up again in the New Testament to describe the uniting of the constituent parts of the spiritual House of God: “... that their hearts might be comforted, being *knit together in love*, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding ...” (Col. 2:2). Again, speaking of the false brethren it is written: “not holding the Head, from which all *the body* by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, *and knit together*, increaseth with the increase of God” (Col. 2:19). The exhortation is therefore, that as Israel stood together as “one man,” and as the foundations of the city were “knit together”, even so Messiah’s brethren should be found labouring in the House as one, their hearts united in the work their Master has set before them.

Another point of exhortation from the Ezra record is that the offering of sacrifice preceded the work of the people. The Altar was the first item to be restored, and we read that: “from the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto Yahweh. But the foundation of the temple of Yahweh was not yet laid” (Ezra 3:6). It is, of course, a first principle for us to understand that any work that we set our hands to must be upon the basis of Messiah’s offering. The Sacrifice of Christ comes first, and it is in seeking to emulate his life of obedience that the believer lays down his life in service. This is a principle that we show in all our ways.

Having begun the work of building the House and City, we find that others, who were not of Israel asked to join in the work:

“Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto Yahweh God of Israel: then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God as ye do ...” (Ezra 4:1-2).

In these words we see a principle at work not dissimilar to the ecumenical movement of our day. Why should we, as Christadelphians work alone? Why not allow the churches to join with us in our worship, and build with us? Why do we have to be different? The response of the leaders of Israel is most instructive:

“Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, *Ye have nothing to do with us* to build an house unto *our* God; but we ourselves together will build unto *Yahweh God of Israel*, as King Cyrus the king of Persia hath commended us” (Ezra 4:3).

Notice the emphatic statement “ye have nothing to do with us”. That ought to be our response to the churches of our day. Christendom at large worships a god that does not exist: a triune god foreign to Bible teaching. They deny the Gospel that was preached to Abraham, rendering it of none effect by their notions of heavingoing. They do not worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, though they may profess to. Though they may seek to join with us in matters of worship they remain, as in Israel’s case “the adversaries,” being in opposition to the things we stand for. Being part of a system that persecuted our brethren and sisters of old, they remain opposed to the Woman’s Seed, and we to them. We, as Christ’s brethren eschew union with the churches not because we like to be different, but because God has commanded us:

“Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness *And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?* ... Wherefore *come out from among them, and be ye separate*, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

Just as the exiles came out from the nations of their dispersion, separating themselves from idols to the ministration of the Temple, even so we, with them, proclaim emphatically: “Ye hath nothing to do with us”.

In due course, the foundation was completed, finished by the hand of Zerubbabel, and there was a time of great rejoicing for the labourers: “all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised Yahweh, because the foundation of the house of Yahweh was laid” (Ezra 3:12). But it would appear that there were those who remembered the former glory of the Temple built by

Solomon, and lamented how the rebuilt Temple did not match the glory of the former (see verse 12). Zechariah spoke of these, saying: “who hath despised the day of small things?” (Zech. 4:10). Rather than to encourage their brethren in their labours, they rather mourned that things today are not as they used to be. Our day, it might be said, is a “day of small things”, when Christ’s brethren are very much in the minority, and are generally despised by a humanistic age of self indulgence. We do not lament this however, for small things can bring great results – that is the point of Christ’s parable of the mustard seed:

“he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what comparison shall we compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, *is less than all the seeds that be in the earth:* but when it is sown, it growth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it” (Mark 4:30-32).

Should we despise the small seed, and refuse to sow it? By no means, for it hath pleased God to make great things known through the foolishness of preaching (1 Cor. 1:21), and thereby save those that believe.

THE TEACHING OF CHRIST

Our Master spoke a parable concerning foundations:

“Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like: He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and *laid the foundation upon a rock:* and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock. But he that heareth and doeth not, is like a man, that *without a foundation* built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great” (Luke 6:47-49).

When times of tribulation come upon the believers, those who are well grounded and settled in the faith will be able to withstand, looking with the eye of faith towards the glory of the Age to Come, when men shall be rewarded according to their deeds. Those who are not well-founded however, have no defence against the stormy winds of life. Though he may hear Messiah’s words, he does not build his edifice upon the right foundation of faithful works, and so will fail at the last.

Of course, in the ultimate sense, the Foundation upon which we build is Messiah himself, and the things testified concerning him: “for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). These other things we have considered in connection with foundations are all bound up with the sacrifice of Christ. Though we, as stated earlier, must lay a foundation of repentance of good works and faith, that which brings about our repentance and gives us faith, is Messiah, the Holy One of God. It is upon such a foundation in Him that eternal things shall stand. Indeed, it is said of Abraham’s faith: “he looked for *a city which hath foundations*, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10). Living a life of dwelling in a tent as a stranger and sojourner in the land of promise, Abraham looked towards the time when this spiritual city shall be built, and rejoiced to see that day.

The Heavenly Jerusalem referred to here, is said to “have foundations”. Ephesians chapter 2, and verse 20 describes those foundation, in speaking of the Household of God:

“Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens of the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon *the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the Chief Corner Stone*; in whom all the building fitly framed together growth unto an holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:19-21).

Again, the book of Revelation speaks of this:

“the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:14).

The testimony of the Apostles therefore are all part of this foundation. The number 12 emphasises the Israelitish aspect of our Hope, as well as being the number of Messiah’s apostles.

Returning back to the days of Ezra, we find that the adversaries of Israel wrote a letter to the king in opposition to the building of the House of God. In this letter, there are basically two charges made against the building:

“Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building *the rebellious and the bad city* ... be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will *they not pay toll, tribute, and custom*, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings ... this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that *they have moved sedition* within the same of old time ...” (Ezra 4:12-15).

Notice the two points here: firstly the city was rebellious and “moved sedition”, and secondly, they would refuse to pay the taxes: “toll, tribute and custom”. Interestingly, these two accusations were also made against Messiah:

“they began to accuse him, saying, We found this fellow perverting the nation, and *forbidding to give tribute to Caesar*, saying that he himself is Christ a king ... *he stirreth up the people*, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Gallilee to this place” (Lu. 23: 1-5).

Human nature never changes, and so just as the adversaries raised accusation against the foundation builders of God’s House, even so Messiah’s adversaries raised similar accusations against him. Seeking to put him to death, they wrested certain of his teaching to present him as being some sort of political activist, standing in opposition to the Roman leaders. Of course, Messiah did not forbid to pay taxes, but he did present himself as being the king of the Jews, foretold from ancient times by the prophets of old. A mixture of truth and error was directed against him, to secure his death.

Though they put Messiah to death, nevertheless all things were being directed by “the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). It was in the purpose of Yahweh that Christ should not only be put to death, but also raised to everlasting life. In so doing, he laid a foundation that cannot be moved by either the adversaries, or by adverse circumstances. It is written concerning him that:

“... if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man’s work shall be made manifest, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is” (1 Cor. 3:12-13).

This is the work that we must set our hand to: building upon the foundation laid by Messiah and his holy apostles, that at the last, we might be found to be faithful labourers looking beyond the difficulties of this life to the “city which hath foundations” – even the New Jerusalem of the Age to Come.

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