

1.

A HEAVENLY VISION

The instructions which God gave to Moses He is also speaking to each one of us today. Not only in the Old Testament but in the New Testament also we find the following admonition: "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (Ex 25:40, Heb 8:5). This is an admonition which we must seriously contemplate.

Moses was a man called by God to lead God's people and to build a dwelling place for Him. Moses understood this exceedingly high calling and was ready to respond to it with all his heart. However, he was not free to do anything on his own. He was not at liberty to invent anything, plan anything or make anything according to his own tastes or desires. He was strictly instructed to make everything only according to the heavenly vision which he had personally received while on the mountain with God.

You see, Moses had gone up the holy mountain. There he spent time (40 days and 40 nights to be exact) in the very presence of God Almighty. He knew the fear of God. He had experienced His awesome majesty and power. Further, he had seen into the heart of God and had begun to understand something of what it was that his Maker was desiring. So when he descended from that mountain, he had burning within him a heavenly vision, a spiritual revelation which then governed his work while he was building a dwelling place for the Most High.

These things should speak loudly and clearly to us today. When we become converted and then begin to desire to be involved in God's work, this is something which we should seriously consider. If we want to be collaborators with God and assist Him in building His eternal dwelling place, there is an important factor which we must contemplate.

Before beginning to work in earnest, we must have entered profoundly into God's presence. Not only must we have entered, we must have spent time there – a lot of time – hearing, seeing and understanding what it is that He desires. Before we go much beyond the stages and activities of spiritual infancy, it is of the utmost importance that we have received a heavenly revelation so that our work is done with Divine substance and is not merely wood, hay and straw (I Cor 3:12). We must have seen God's holy plan and then build in harmony with it.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is not an unimportant consideration. It is not something which we should take lightly. When we become involved in building together with God, we take part in a construction which is eternal. What God builds through us will be His habitation forever. Therefore, it cannot be, it must not be something done without much revelation and prayer and even fear and trembling. We all should have a healthy dose of respect and awe for God when we begin to build anything in His name.

The Lord our God does not and never will live in a temple which human hands have made (Acts 7:48). Therefore, if we do not build according to His design, what we build will not satisfy Him and He will not live there. It will not be the place of His residence.

Many Christians today have become deluded because God occasionally visits their construction sites. Since His presence comes once in a while, they then imagine that He is approving what they are doing.

But what we urgently need to be building is not somewhere that God stops to visit now and then, but the place where He is pleased to reside. We must be constructing the

eternal, spiritual house of God where He will dwell permanently, for eternity. To do so, we must have received a profound, heavenly vision. Everything which we do must be guided by this revelation.

OTHER PATTERNS

Many millions of believers, men and women of God, are building today. There is a lot of Christian activity. Every day which passes, literally hundreds of "churches" spring up around the world. I like to believe that most of these dear brothers and sisters are doing their work with a pure heart and a sincere desire to please God. However, very many of them seem to be constructing without much understanding of the heavenly plan. Instead, they are simply copying what they see others doing. They are building according to the vision they have seen on the next street corner and not on the holy mountain of God.

Instead of receiving a vision from God, they are relying on man. In place of a heavenly revelation, they hear of some group or other which is having success and attracting large numbers and then rush to copy what these others are doing. Perhaps some are merely repeating what their particular denomination has done in the past. Possibly tradition has bound them to a certain pattern for construction. Others may be doing what they learned in a Bible school or seminary. Still others rely upon their own popularity, gift or charisma to attract and hold numbers of people in their flock. There are, in fact, very many methods and patterns being used in building today.

But perhaps we should all stop for one moment and carefully consider what we are doing. This is a very serious subject. The things we do have eternal consequences. Therefore, it could not hurt to take a few minutes and prayerfully contemplate our works for God. Let us enter into His presence and spread out our plans and projects before Him. Let us reverently open our hearts to hear His opinion. Let us ask ourselves and God honestly, are all these things which we are doing really made of fireproof

materials? Is what we are constructing really the house of God? Is it something in which He will be pleased to dwell for eternity?

In I Corinthians 3:10-17 Paul gives us some admonitions and instructions about how to build up God's house and what materials we should use. He urges us to be very careful about what we are doing. He says: "But let each one take heed how he builds [on the foundation]" (vs10). It is not sufficient for us merely to build anything we think might be good or something of which others approve. It is essential that we build according to God's design and use the approved materials.

So, dearest brothers do be careful! Be very, very careful that what you are doing is in harmony with the mind of God. Don't be in such a hurry to get out there and do something. It is extremely important that we hear from God and see His eternal habitation first, before we begin to build. If we begin with a heavenly vision, then all our work will be approved. Thus we will not be ashamed when He comes and examines what we have done.

As we go along with this book, we will be looking in detail into exactly what kind of materials we should use, but for now we must clearly see that there are two types available. There are supernatural materials which are typified by "gold, silver [and] precious stones," and earthly materials, represented by "wood, hay [and] straw" (vs 12).

The first type has its origin in God, being heavenly in quality. The second type is something merely human and natural. In today's world, both kinds of materials can be used to make impressive constructions. Many multimillion dollar mansions have wood as their basic structure, but in God's kingdom, only by using His materials and following His plans can we satisfy Him.

SUCCESS IS NOT THE STANDARD

In our endeavor to be pleasing to God, one thing must become very clear to us and that is that the yardstick for our works is not success. Let me repeat that. The measure

which decides whether or not God is pleased with what we are doing is not how many people are coming to our meetings. It is not how popular we and our message have become. It is not that others in the Christian community are applauding and admiring our work. It is not that our work is growing and spreading at such a rate that the whole nation and even the world is beginning to hear about us. Honestly, even a virus can spread rapidly and become world famous.

Yet in our world today, there seems to be one criterion which people admire. When other people look at our work, usually they are looking to see one thing. They want to know whether or not we are successful. The worldly standard is normally this: Is there some visible amount of success? Is the work expanding? Is there some concrete evidence of achievement? If there is, our work is admired and approved. If not, then what we are doing is disregarded or even despised. This is the standard of the world.

But God's standard is completely different. His standard is obedience. His measure is whether or not we are working according to His plan. What we do in obedience to Him may appear successful in men's eyes. However, it is also quite possible that it will not. God's ways are often mysterious. He does not use the ways and methods of the world. His wisdom is something which this world and the people in it do not understand (See I Cor 1:18-25). Often His works are hidden, small and unexpected. Yet through the course of time, they are shown to produce the most excellent results.

To clarify this point a little, let us take a look at some of the men of God who were powerfully used by Him but yet who were despised and rejected. They were successful in God's eyes, but discounted by the world and some even by the religious communities of their day.

Noah was obedient but certainly not popular. I imagine most people considered him to be crazy. There he was building a huge boat on dry land with no way to ever get it to water. No doubt he was the laughingstock of the surrounding community. But he was obedient to God.

Jeremiah was a prophet who was anointed and used by God. Two entire books of the Old Testament are his works and prophecies. Every single word was inspired and anointed by the God of the universe. Every prophecy he spoke was right on target and came (or will come) to pass. Yet he had no group of followers. Almost no one paid any attention to him or obeyed his words. The nation to which he prophesied never repented and eventually had to be judged by God. His “ministry” was a disaster from a human standpoint. Many of the other prophets also fit into this category.

Although we might imagine the situation differently, Paul the apostle also seemed a failure at the end of his ministry. He was imprisoned, so his “sphere of ministry” shrunk up from being a globe-trotting worker to only having contact with a very few who managed to visit him in prison. Then, all the churches in Asia, many of which he had founded, rejected him and turned away (II Tim 1:15). He did manage to write a few short letters from prison but this certainly could not have taken up all his time. Yet who could have imagined the fruit which this period of his life would produce?

Jesus, the firstborn Son of God, also was despised and rejected by the majority (Is 53:3). Although He did enjoy some times of popularity, He knew that men were often flocking to Him for the wrong reasons. So, every so often He spoke a word of righteousness to them which caused many of them to turn around and leave. At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus was alone. At the peak of His supernatural work, all His followers abandoned Him.

Although today we view Jesus’ work as a success since Christianity has spread all over the globe, if we would look at things as if we were there at the time, His work would probably have seemed a failure, or even a disaster. He, the leader, was dead and all of His followers were scattered. Apparent success is not and can never be the measure of our work for God.

OUR WORKS WILL BE JUDGED

When Jesus returns, what we have done in His name will be judged. Again in I Corinthians 3:13 we read that our works will be tested by supernatural fire. If our works have been done with combustible materials, ie. something human, natural and earthly, they will be burned up. If our works have been done with heavenly materials, they will survive the test.

God assures us here that even if the works of some are destroyed, they themselves will still be saved (vs 15). However, it appears that there is a very severe judgment for those who construct wrongly. Not only will their works be lost along with any rewards for such works, but there will also be some kind of judgment for them personally.

Perhaps related to this judgment is a warning expressed in I Corinthians 3:17 where we read: "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him." The context of this verse is very important. The subject here is building the temple of God. In this work of construction we are told that if we "defile" the temple of God, we will suffer severe judgment. According to R. N. Champlin, Ph.D., in his New Testament commentary, this word "defile" can also be translated: "ruin," "destroy," "corrupt," "damage," and/or "adulterate."

The word translated "destroy" (vs 17), referring to what God will do to the offending person, is exactly the same Greek word as "defile" in the first part of the verse. So we see that God will punish the one who defiles His eternal house exactly according to what he or she did. The defiling works which anyone does will become their own judgment.

What then does it mean to "defile" His house? It is by using incorrect materials that we can pollute or damage the very dwelling place of God – His temple. It is quite possible for us, working without supernatural revelation, to construct things within the temple of God which are defiling, polluting, damaging and adulterating it. Further, if

and when we do such things, we will suffer severe consequences when Jesus comes to judge us for our works.

Dear brothers and sisters, this verse should be very sobering. We are not dealing here with some kind of temporary earthly construction. We are building the eternal dwelling place of God Almighty. Therefore, we must be very, very careful what we do. If we, through our ignorance and fleshly motives, defile God's house, we will be defiled in the same manner when He comes.

SOME OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

In the Old Testament we are given some specific examples of this kind of pollution. In the book of Leviticus chapter 10 beginning with verse 1 we read about the story of two priests, Nadab and Abihu, who were sons of Aaron. They seemed to enjoy their religious duties and became proud because of their position among the people. So they thought that they might improve a little on God's design.

One day instead of following the commands of God they got their censers, put a little incense in them and marched into the tabernacle to make their own kind of offering. They had come up with a new, modern way of worship. From God's viewpoint it was "profane fire" (Lev 10:1). This invention of theirs cost them their lives. They had profaned the dwelling of God and so fire came out from the presence of God and consumed them.

In II Kings chapter 16 we have the story of Ahaz who was one of the kings who ruled Judah. Unfortunately, this man did not fear God or have any understanding of His ways. One day he took a trip to Damascus to meet the king of Assyria whom he had just paid off with gold and silver which he had stolen from the temple. There he saw a pagan altar. It was really impressive. Evidently it was large, ornate and spectacularly beautiful. It seemed much better in his eyes than the fairly simple, smaller bronze altar which Solomon had made.

So he sent Urijah the high priest some measurements and a copy of the design. Even before Ahaz had gotten

back home, Urijah had made him a full-sized replica of this pagan altar. Next, Ahaz had Urijah haul the bronze altar of the Lord off to one side and set up his new impressive altar in the temple. He then instructed the priests to use the fancy altar for all the sacrifices and offerings. The old bronze altar he would just use to “inquire by,” meaning to seek the guidance of God. Probably, this bronze altar was used by him very little.

This new altar was big and impressive, but it was not the design of God. It was a grand, human effort. It was appealing in many earthly, fleshly ways. But it was a pollution of God’s symbolic habitation, the temple.

There are many things which men appreciate with their natural senses. Beautiful surroundings, eloquent messages, soul-stirring music and many other such things are enjoyable to us. Therefore, there is a great temptation to institute these things in our work for the Lord.

While we are building His dwelling place, it is tempting to add a little bit of our own ideas and decorations. It is very difficult for us not to incorporate some of our own designs and directions. But let us always remember: “For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (Lk 16:15).

MANY TYPES OF WORKERS

There are many kinds of laborers involved today in God’s building project. Just as an earthly construction project requires many different types of workers, including electricians, plumbers, carpenters, masons, etc., so the building of God requires people to perform many different functions. We read in the New Testament about apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Further, we are told about many other different types of gifts and ministries. It is not the purpose of this writing to delineate and discuss each of these different functions, but only to say that they are many and diverse.

One important ministry which does have a direct bearing on our present investigation is the work of an

apostle. God is the architect of His building. He Himself has designed the plan. But there are also those who are called "master builders" (I Cor 3:10). They are sort of like construction supervisors. They are individuals who have spent time on the mountain of God. They have gazed deeply into His heart. They have seen His plan and have understood how to build what they have seen. This is the work of an apostle. An apostle then is someone who has an overall view of what God desires and a clear, spiritual understanding of how to construct what has been revealed to him.

The apostles are those to whom God has shown His "mysteries." Paul writes: "by revelation He made known to me the mystery" (Eph 3:3). Having received these revelations, they then become "stewards of the mysteries of God" (I Cor 4:1). They have gotten something of supreme value and are responsible before God in their stewardship of it. This is referred to in Ephesians 3:9 as the "administration of the mystery" (NASB). This means that the apostles are to be lowly servants, faithfully sharing with the rest of the body of Christ the precious things which God has revealed to them. They must work to help the other members be guided by this same heavenly revelation.

Of course every type of ministry needs some divine revelation to operate. Each member of the body must follow supernatural guidance to be effective. However, it is here that we encounter a common problem in the church today. To explain further, we will use an earthly example. Let us talk about a plumber. Let us assume that he knows how to fit pipe. He is good at what he does and knows that it is an essential part of the plan. But if he begins to think that what he sees and knows is the whole plan, then problems begin to appear.

Perhaps we could think of our "plumber" as an evangelist. He is good at what he does. He knows that his part is important. Everywhere he looks in the Bible, he sees evangelism. Since this is his gift and function, this is what God reveals to him from His word. But it is all too possible and even common for this member to begin to imagine that

he has seen the whole plan. He begins to think that his part is the most important, his work is the work which God wants done. Since this is what he sees when he looks into the word of God, he then supposes that is all there is to see.

However, since this brother or sister is not an apostle, his or her vision is limited and God does not reveal to him the whole plan. Unless he has the humility to realize this and understand his need for the rest of the body, he will undoubtedly encounter difficulty and even cause many problems in the church through his work.

Instead of working in harmony with the other parts, he or she may become independent and even fight against what others are doing, since it is different from what he has seen. (By the way, we do not mean to pick on evangelists, this same problem also surfaces with other gifted members of the body of Christ.)

Today in Christ's church we see many brothers and sisters building in this shortsighted manner. Thinking their ministry is the most important or even the only way, they begin to "build a church" around their ministry. Instead of simply doing their part to build the body, they get off in a corner and surround themselves with others who agree with them or whom they have convinced of the significance of their ministry.

The result is that we see groups trying to construct God's house solely out of pipes and fittings (which might be evangelism). Others are building only of wires, plugs and light fixtures (which could correspond to prophecy or teaching). Each one emphasizes their understanding and gift without the humility to see that theirs is only a part of the plan.

Thus we come to understand part of the importance of the apostolic ministry. Part of their function is to serve the various parts of the body by helping them understand the whole plan of God and how they can perform their part in harmony with the rest. Since they have seen the entire building, they can be of use to the others, helping them use their gifts and ministries to construct the eternal dwelling place of God. Apostolic vision is a necessary ingredient in

the building of God's house. It is important then for all the workers on the construction project to listen to and understand the heavenly vision from those who are genuinely receiving it.

Divine revelation is absolutely essential when we are building the church of God. We must not even begin without it. Just as a builder of a large building or even a smaller house would not think of beginning without a plan, so we too must receive revelation from God. We must have seen just what it is that is in His heart. Then we must be careful to build exactly according to this vision which we received while on the mountain with Him.