

12.

BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATION

When addressing the problem of divisions and teaching the new believers in Corinth about how to build the church, Paul says: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor 3:11). In any kind of construction, the foundation is perhaps the most important part. It is the essential point of beginning for everything which will be done later.

It is at precisely this point that so many of today's denominations, groups and "churches" have, perhaps inadvertently, strayed from God's plan. A great majority of today's Christian groups are based upon a set of doctrines, practices, revelations, a system of human leadership or some other such thing. Their basis – the fundamental thought which holds them together – is not simply and purely a person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Clearly, all Christian groups have some foundation in Christ or they could not be considered Christian. Yet many have mistakenly laid other foundations alongside of, or together with the person of Jesus as their basis for fellowship. They have established other criteria as the basis of their meetings and relationships with one another. Then they have built up their particular organization on this defective foundation.

Without a proper foundation, anything which is built on top of it is put at risk. If the foundation is not correctly

laid, the whole structure is going to be faulty. Whatever is constructed on top of it can never be done properly unless everything is first torn down and the foundation remade in the proper way.

The person of (not the doctrine about) Jesus Christ is our one and only foundation. The message of this book can be encapsulated in this one thought: we must come back to Jesus Christ in all our building work. He is the foundation. He is the substance. He is the source. He is the form. He is the Head. He is all in all. To me this is one of the most important features of this understanding of the church which we have been discussing: it is Christ centered. In everything He is to have the preeminence (Col 1:18).

SO HOW DO WE BUILD?

So how do we build? First we introduce men and women to the person of Jesus Christ. We explain to them how they need to thoroughly repent of their sins so that they can be forgiven and receive His own uncreated, eternal life inside of them. Next, we lead them to give themselves completely to Him, yielding their lives in total submission to His will. This will open the way for Him to do His transforming work within them without hindrance.

This step of total consecration to God is indispensable. Unless and until believers are ready and willing to submit themselves completely to the government of Christ, they cannot enter very fully into the true church experience. Since Jesus' body is totally dependent upon Him for its daily direction and even its very life, when Christians have a partial or incomplete submission to Him, their enjoyment of His body will be very partial also.

After the step of complete consecration, new believers must be shown how to live in a love relationship with God and with one another. A life of loving service to one another and even to unbelievers is the only genuine life goal any Christian can pursue. This is the focus and direction of any true Christianity. As we allow Christ to live this kind of focused life through us, others will be able to see an exam-

ple to imitate and follow. Our best teaching is the example of how we allow Christ to live in us and through us.

All this is really very simple. It would be much more simple if so many other methods of building were not so common, thus obscuring people's vision. One of the biggest obstacles which we face today is that there are so many faulty structures which have confused and blinded God's people.

Consequently, a large part of our work seems to be undoing much of what has been built up. We must tear down everything earthly and human and get back to Jesus. Before we can build the new, we have to remove the rubble of the past. We must strive to bring everyone back to "...the simplicity that is in Christ" (II Cor 11:3). As we simply live Christ's life in submission to Him and in unity with one another, the one true church will begin to be seen.

WE MUST HAVE THE SAME PLAN

After we have laid the wonderful foundation of Jesus Christ, then we can begin to build. But with whom can we labor? Who will join together with us in constructing the eternal habitation of God? Here we find another important ingredient. As mentioned earlier in this book, we can love all, serve all, receive all and even meet with all because they are loved by God. But when it comes to building, there is another requirement.

In order to build together with someone else, we must have the same plan. We must be building according to the same pattern. If not, then much effort and time will be wasted. We will end up disillusioned and frustrated.

Let us imagine that you want to build a boat. So you get a plan and begin to build. Soon your neighbor wants to help. Naturally, you welcome his assistance. But perhaps so much of what your neighbor does is wasted. He cuts boards in different shapes and lengths than your plan specifies. He joins parts together in ways that you have to dismantle later and redo. Not only that but he takes apart things which you have done and does them wrongly.

So you scratch your head and wonder why. Why is so much of what this helpful neighbor does wrong? Why is it that instead of helping, he seems to be hindering? Then one day you discover the reason. He has another set of plans. He thinks that you are building an airplane rather than a boat. Instead of working together, you are working at cross purposes. Much time, effort and materials have been wasted.

From this illustration we can see that in order to work together with other brothers to build up God's house, we must have the same vision. We must have seen and be working from the same plan. If not, we will experience a lot of frustration and very little progress. There are countless men and women of God who have become discouraged in their work for the Lord because they encountered much frustration trying to work with others.

When others have a "denominational" pattern, when they are building up something with earthly materials and human leadership, then you will have a very difficult time working in this environment. While some have tried to "work within the system" or even tried to change it, it is very rare for anyone to have much success building in this way. There certainly is, in almost any place, the opportunity to pray. It is usually possible to edify some in their individual lives and help them along their way in any situation. Yet any artificial, human structures will limit and inhibit much progress toward the goal of God.

So the best thing to do is to find some others who have the same vision. Things will go much more smoothly if we can locate and work together with others who have the same plan. Concerning those who have a different vision, you can bless them, pray for them and trust that their Lord will take care of them and their work for Him. Your part is to simply obey God in what He has shown you to do.

If you do not know anyone who has received the same understanding, then you must begin to pray. Pray that God will bring you into contact with some other believers who are pursuing Jesus in the way we have been discussing. You might be surprised to find that there are many more

believers just like you whose hearts are yearning to see God's living house built up and completed.

If there is no larger group available, then you need to pray for another brother who can work with you. One is enough, but two or three are better. You can then walk in God's presence together and allow Him to build you together on His foundation. This will take time, possibly even years of living and interacting together.

This living together will not be easy. But there are no shortcuts. You must allow Christ to establish you together in Him in a solid, real way which only He can do. Therefore, we should prepare ourselves mentally for this. We must be willing to pay the emotional and spiritual cost which this will involve. We also must be willing to invest much time, possibly many years and even our life serving others while God does His work in them and in ourselves also.

WHERE DO WE FIND THESE OTHERS?

Some questions which come to many people's minds when thinking about a church experience without human leadership are: "With whom shall we meet?" "With whom will we have daily fellowship and relationships?" "Who is it that we are supposed to serve in love?" The answer is quite simple. God Himself will bring these people into our lives.

When we follow Christ, we will encounter others in the normal course of our living. Certain of them will stand out as someone whom God has brought to us. They might have some needs which we can meet. They might have a hunger for what God is showing to us. They might already have a similar vision and be seeking others with whom they can put it into practice. The possibilities here are endless, but the result is the same.

As we walk in the spirit, we will have a spiritual "knowing" that certain people are being placed by God alongside of us for some reason known to Him alone. We do not have the right to pick and choose people who

appeal to us. We are not free to reject those who have serious problems or might be difficult. When we, walking in intimacy with God, know that He has placed someone in our lives, then we must love and serve them in His name.

It is clear that as human beings we can have only a limited number of truly close relationships with others. Our capacities are finite. If we have a handful of really intimate brothers and sisters, this is quite a lot. So, we can concentrate our ministry and love on those who are closest to us, building and edifying each other under the government of God.

Naturally, we will also have some relationships with others who are more "distant" spiritually. It is not being implied here that we should arrange a small circle of intimate friends who agree with us and shut out the rest. The thought is simply that we will always have some brothers and sisters who are more intimately related with us and others who have a somewhat less intimate connection.

Those we know and with whom we have a greater intimacy will likewise have relationships with others who are more distant from us. Those in turn will have others with which they have communion and so on. Soon, there will be a whole network of interrelated believers loving and serving one another.

Perhaps a good analogy of this could be a brick wall. Each brick has another brick on each side and a couple more on the top and the bottom. These others bricks also have bricks touching them, which have other bricks in contact with them. The whole then makes a wall. As believers live in loving communion with those who are close to them, the whole then makes the church.

No one (besides Jesus) needs to try to create or control these relationships. There is no need for someone to try to organize or plan such a thing. It is God Himself who places the members in the body as it pleases Him (I Cor 12:18). He is the One who should be in control of these relationships. As He brings others into each of our lives and we allow Him to build up an intimate communion between us, His eternal house is being constructed.

The house of God is something living, something “organic” so to speak. There is no “how to” manual. There are no specific, step by step, plans which we can implement to make sure things are done correctly. The relationships and fellowship about which we are speaking are something which the Holy Spirit can and will produce as we give Him our hearts and minds. We must have faith that as we follow Him day by day, He will build His church as He has promised.

Although many humans long for something defined, orderly and programmed, the house of God can never be built in this way. There is no systematic method we can use to produce what He desires. It is only by maintaining a daily faith relationship with our Head that we can realize this glorious experience. Human intelligence and organizational ability must be discarded. All the wonderful attributes of the bride of Christ can only be known by those walking in intimate communion with Jesus.

MORE GIFTED MEMBERS

It is clear that there will be members of the body who have gifts and ministries which will reach beyond the “few” with whom they have a spiritual intimacy. Naturally, God will lead them in using these gifts to serve His body in a wider way. Preaching and teaching, healing, etc. are ministries for the entire church to enjoy. By no means is anyone suggesting that such ministries of larger scope are unnecessary or are to be rejected.

However, this does not negate the need of those with such ministries to be connected in spiritual intimacy with a few others. The fact that they have a ministry to many does not signify that they have no necessity for close communion with a few especially intimate brothers also. No one should neglect such spiritual fellowship with others and concentrate only on “their ministry.” Believers who do so run a very high risk of becoming isolated, like a lamb far from the flock, and therefore become easy prey for the enemy. Our communion with other believers who are close

to us will provide a living way for God to bring edification, inspiration and even correction into our lives.

NEW TRANSPARENCY

When we are walking together with some others, what we generally expect is that we will find a great blessing. Hopefully there will be a generous amount of grace and satisfaction in our communion. But something else will also occur. We will begin to see the other's sin. We will realize the weakness and failures of the others. Their life will become more and more transparent to us.

This will occur for two reasons. First, we will find that God draws us closer to these others. We will have a frequent, if not daily, communion. So the fact of this intimacy will result in our knowing our brothers and sisters in a deeper way. It is possible for people to relate to each other for many years, perhaps while being members of some kind of religious structure for example, without knowing the sins and faults of the others. But when we enter into the spiritual communion of the body of Christ, it is inevitable that we will begin to know much more about each other – both the good and the bad.

The second reason is that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. He came to “convict the world of sin” (Jn 16:8). So when we begin to open up to Him and His building work, sin begins to be exposed. As we “walk in the light” (I Jn 1:7) with others, this light reveals many things. It “makes manifest” (Eph 5:13) what has previously been hidden.

When we begin to discover that our brothers and sisters are not perfect, when we see that they are sinners like ourselves, when their fallen, not yet transformed nature begins to be expressed, what is our reaction? The natural man tends to pull back. Our human nature would like to stay far away from such people with these ugly, difficult problems. But this is not God's response. This is not His solution.

It is here that we find a real test of our love for God and our commitment to our brothers. It is here that we see

if we are ready and willing to live in and build up the house of God.

Here we have the wonderful opportunity to overcome our natural reactions. We can, through the grace of God, forgive others. We can look upon them through the eyes of God. We can deny ourselves our human responses and seek God's grace to treat them as He would. Another way of thinking about this is that we can love them as we love ourselves (Mt 22:39).

This is a real challenge. Here is the true proof of our Christianity. If we cannot love our brother, then we will never experience the fullness of the one true church. If we fail here, then we will never be built together upon God's foundation. When we simply run away from those who are difficult or sinful, we will never succeed in seeing the house of God built up. Lacking artificial structures to keep people together, we only have God's love on which to depend. The genuine body of Christ is "...edifying [building up] of itself in love" (Eph 4:16).

Once again we see that it is here that the cross of Jesus comes into view. It is when we live with others in God's love that our own "self" must be crucified. In order to succeed in living in love, we must die. Our natural reactions, opinions and desires must be laid in the grave. The fallen soul can never stand up to such a test. Only the Life of God within us is capable of living in love and harmony with all those whom He has chosen.

BEING BUILT TOGETHER

Following this path of love and self-denial, after some time we will discover our union and communion with these other like-minded brothers and sisters growing. We will realize that the love of God is giving us a victory over our human reactions to their failures and weaknesses. We will have heard all the accusations of the devil which he raises against them. We will have observed all their obvious sins and weaknesses. We will have been made aware of their human failings. Yet we will still love them.

This then is the beginning of the building of God. This is our being built upon His foundation, Jesus Christ. This is an eternal union of ourselves with God and with one another. This is something which has passed the tests of this world and has become eternal. When we have seen the truth about others and still love them, when the devil has shared with us all his insights about their sins and failures, when we have overcome our own reactions and feelings, then what remains is something which will endure forever.

When we cooperate with Jesus and allow Him to build us together in this way, then the church becomes much less vulnerable and eventually, invincible to the attacks of the enemy. In the Old Testament, the stones for the temple were carefully crafted. They were cut, sawn and possibly even sanded until they fit perfectly together. When they were put into place in the temple, it has been said that they fit so well that not even the blade of a knife could be inserted between them.

You see, the devil's attacks are like the blade of a knife. He loves to insert his accusations about another brother in the middle of our relationship. When his words find a little space in our hearts and minds, then he begins to twist this knife to pry us further apart. This is his main technique to destroy the work of God. It is to "reveal" to us the faults and sins of others. Then he uses this information to destroy the love which should hold us together.

But when we succeed in living in love, when the devil's accusations no longer find a place in our hearts, when he has expended all his efforts but has failed to separate us, then the gates of hell begin to tremble. When we overcome his words which he uses to accuse others, then he has very little power left. It is then that he has exhausted all his ammunition and failed.

When we no longer agree with the thoughts which he puts in our minds, when we stop reacting in natural, human ways to his assaults, when we continue to love our brothers and sisters in the middle of his attacks on their character, then the devil's kingdom is in trouble. It is then that Christian men and women are winning the victory.

They are overcoming God's enemy. God's house is being built up.

As we have seen, love is the only glue that holds the true body of Christ together. Without some artificial doctrine, leader, practice, method, etc. to keep believers together, only God's love will work. So the devil does his best to attack this unique, precious connection.

When we, acting in our flesh, cooperate with him and criticize, defame, gossip and speak ill of our brothers and sisters, we tear apart the only thing which joins us together. This kind of speaking is sin and must be avoided at all costs. If and when we find ourselves involved in it, a deep and thorough repentance is the only solution. It is only when we overcome in this sphere that we will see the house of God being built up in love.

ADDING MORE STONES

When two or three brothers begin to experience victory in the area of loving one another then this is the beginning of something very precious and real. When five or six, or even twelve begin to enjoy a relationship of godly love, then the foundation of God has been well established. This then becomes something very solid to which the Lord can add a lot of weight.

For example, let us suppose that a few brothers are in communion with each other and with Jesus. Suddenly, perhaps being enthused with a revelation of what God is desiring, a whole group of other believers decides to join them. Let us put this number of new ones at about 100. But if these few original brothers are not well built together, if the enemy still has some ammunition left which they have not overcome, then this group will not stand the test.

Sooner or later, the devil will manage to drive a wedge in between these first few brothers. They will disagree about some doctrine, direction, leadership or situation. Soon a rupture of fellowship will take place. As for the 100 more who came recently, they too will be confused and divided. They might have thought that they were coming

to a place of love and unity, but instead they see fighting and contention. Some will take one side and others another. This will result in a division of the body and the destruction of the work of God.

Before the Lord can add more weight, the first few blocks (brothers) must be well established on the foundation. They must be solidly joined together in God's love. They need to be patient and allow Jesus to do a complete work in their individual lives and among them. Then, and only then will they be able to support more weight.

This is an essential first step in the building of God. Don't think you can skip it. You cannot rush or bypass this process. Unless and until several brothers are thoroughly built together in God's love, anything which is built on top of it will not stand for any extended time. This is precisely one of the main reasons why many groups flare up for a short while, seeming to have a good revelation and flowing of the Holy Spirit, and then disappear. The first few "foundational" brothers were not well knit together in God's love.

Jesus spent about three and one half years with His disciples. During that time, they no doubt had struggles in their relationships with one another. So Jesus taught them. He taught them to love, to forgive, to turn the other cheek, to be meek and humble. He instructed them many things about how to live together in spiritual communion. Every situation He used as an opportunity to teach them to live in harmony.

For example, there were frequent contentions among the disciples about power, greatness and authority. Some of them seemed to desire a position of preeminence over the others. As we have seen, this is also a frequent reason why many groups fail today. When certain brothers begin contending and disputing among themselves about who will have the most influence, or someone rises up to take control of the group, the true church experience is doomed.

Dealing with these situations, Jesus soundly rebuked them. He stated repeatedly and clearly that in His kingdom, the greatest must become the least. He also demon-

strated for them powerful examples of service and humility (Jn 13:3-17). So, after His death and resurrection, these brothers had some supernatural building. They had some history of living together in the presence of the Lord.

On the day of Pentecost, there were 120 of these disciples in the "upper room." Most, if not all, of these brothers and sisters had spent much time with each other and with the Lord. They must have had a certain amount of supernatural relationship or "building." It is evident that they did because on that very day the Lord chose to add "about three thousand" new believers to their number (Acts 2:41).

Amazingly, these 120 withstood this weight. The apostles did not begin to compete with each other about who would have the most influence or be the greatest. Some petty doctrine or other did not divide them. The problems which arose did not cause them to disagree and split into two or three different churches. The challenges they faced did not induce them to begin to distrust each other, contend with each other or cast each other out of the church. This is because they loved one another. They had spent time together in the presence of Jesus and He had done an eternal work in their hearts.

This is what all of us need today. It is essential that we take advantage of the few other brothers and sisters with whom we have communion. Here is the proving ground. It is here that the rubber meets the road. They are the ones with whom God has put us. It is with these few that we need to learn to live in harmony and love. When this small part of God's building is well established, then it may be that the Lord can trust that this part of His house has a foundation strong enough to support more weight.

Perhaps we think that all this might be easier if we could only find some Christians who were more agreeable. If we could locate some that were less problematic, less sinful, less stubborn and more sensitive to us. But "God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased" (I Cor 12:18). Those whom He has brought into our lives are those with whom we must have communion. It is with them that we must overcome. It is with these few

that we allow God to work in our hearts until we love them as He does.

Jesus knows what needs to be done in our hearts. He knows the needs of others too. So when He puts us together, He sees how He will use our gifts and anointing to minister to the rest. He also foresees how the problems and sins of each individual will help the others grow. He sees how we can bless one another. He is likewise aware of how their weaknesses and problems will impact our lives, causing us to die to ourselves in order to keep on loving them. He has designed these relationships to be the most effective in dealing with our problems and promoting our real spiritual growth.

So we see that where we are is exactly where God wants us to be. Unless He has given us clear guidance to move somewhere else, our situation is perfect for us. If we have found some others with the same plan and vision of God's house, it is here we must stay and allow God to do His work in us and through us. When He is ready, when we are transformed into His glorious image, when we are no longer susceptible to the work of the enemy, then He may use us to be effective in the lives of a larger number of people.

CUTTING OFF FELLOWSHIP

So when are we allowed to cut off fellowship with someone else? When is the point when another person's sins are so great that we are not supposed to take any more? When do we give up on someone else? The answer seems to be almost never. We can only give up our love for another brother or sister when God Himself gives up on them. God does not give up easily.

However, Jesus does give us some guidelines for our continuation of fellowship with someone who offends us. We read: "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of

two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (Mt 18:15-17).

Here we have a formula for dealing with a brother who sins against us. First we go to him, not to everyone else. If he repents, then we are to forgive him (Lk 17:3); not only once but "seventy times seven" (Mt 18:22). However, if he won't listen, we are to take two or three with us. If the brother or sister still won't receive our complaint, we are allowed to take the matter before the larger group. Finally, and only after taking the first three steps, we are allowed to cease reaching out to him or her in love.

It is my understanding that the final "you" in verse 17 of Matthew chapter 18 is singular. That means that you, personally, may withdraw from fellowship with that person if you have followed the procedure above. This does not seem to be a method for excluding someone from the church as a whole. This is not a formula for "church discipline." Although it has often been applied in this way, it seems that in this case, only you (singular) are no longer required to maintain communion with the other person.

A "DISORDERLY" BROTHER

There also seem to be a few other situations where our communion with others is not demanded. There is a passage where Paul teaches us to "withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (II Thess 3:6). When someone is not walking in communion with Jesus and therefore not "walking in the light" (I Jn 1:7), it becomes very difficult to have fellowship with them.

The word "disorderly" above must mean walking in consistent, unrepentant sin. Since their heart is not seeking the things of God, there is really no benefit in trying to build together with them.

Although we might be used by God to rescue them from their behavior (Js 5:19,20), without their repentance,

any long-term association will not be constructive in any eternal way.

This principle applies in many situations. When it becomes obvious that a brother or sister is not truly seeking the kingdom of God, we need not spend our time and energy trying to maintain communion with them. When they resist the authority of Jesus and are manifestly being led by the flesh, then we cannot build together with them either.

Paul also teaches, referring to those who were opposing his teaching: "If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself" (I Tim 6:3-5).

Any Christian walking in the flesh cannot co-labor with you in building God's house. It is better not to spend your time with such people. This does not mean that you don't continue to love them and to pray for them. It simply means that we must invest our time and energy serving those whose hearts are open to Jesus and His kingdom.

The scriptures are not advocating here some kind of harsh, hateful attitude of rejection which is common in many Christian groups today toward someone who has stopped agreeing with them. There is no thought of cutting off any and all communication, treating them roughly or unlovingly, breaking familial ties and shunning them as if they had the plague. Such attitudes do not reflect the heart of God. Instead, it seems that this must be a natural reaction toward those whose hearts are not seeking the government of Christ.

When other believers are not in submission to and in communion with the Head of the body, spiritual relationships become almost impossible. We therefore are urged, instead of trying to maintain some kind of fleshly friend-

ships, to simply concentrate our time and efforts on those who are seeking Jesus. The automatic, spiritual response is to work together with those who are “walking in the light.”

SELF-PRUNING

In many ways, the one true church is self-pruning. We won't usually need to spend time worrying about excluding someone. They will normally just exclude themselves. If we and those with whom we have intimate communion are living in genuine submission to Jesus, then this leaves no room for the flesh. There will be around us an atmosphere of holiness and commitment.

Anyone coming into contact with us should sense this. If they do and are attracted, this is good. But in my experience, many do not have this heart attitude. They are not ready and willing to surrender completely to Jesus. This is not what they are seeking or something for which they are longing. Although they may feel attracted by the loving relationships which they see, they often don't feel comfortable with the total commitment to the Lord which they sense around them.

So these folks don't stick around. Although we may see them from time to time, they seem to exclude themselves from fellowship by their lack of desire for Jesus and Him only. True communion can only be known among those who have a reciprocity of total commitment to Jesus and to one another.

In the early church perhaps this situation was not so simple. Then, there was only one group of people called “the church.” So there seemed to be the idea that everyone who was born again had to fit in. But today, believers have many options. If they are not attracted to what we are doing, there are thousands of other groups where they can seek whatever it is that they want. They can find a group which seems to satisfy their need.

An example of this could be someone who is seeking a place of authority and recognition. At first, he or she might imagine that your sphere of fellowship would be a

perfect platform from which to launch their “ministry.” Perhaps mistaking the leadership of the invisible God for no leadership at all, this person might imagine that they can assume this position for themselves.

After discovering that this will not work, they will probably leave and look for a more suitable place. I John 2:18,19 reads: “...even now many antichrists [those taking the place of Christ] have come...They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.”

TURNING OVER TO SATAN

It seems that on one occasion, Paul recommended that the believers take a radical step. In this case, when someone was sinning blatantly and unrepentantly, he instructed them to: “...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (I Cor 5:5).

In another situation, two men, Hymenaeus and Alexander had evidently fallen into obvious sin. They refused to listen to the voice of their conscience and repent. Their sin and their justification of it had gone so far that their lives amounted to blasphemy of Jesus’ person and work. No doubt Paul and/or others tried to warn them and rescue them but to no avail. So eventually Paul was driven to the point of desperation where he, probably in prayer, delivered them “...to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (I Tim 1:20).

The thought behind this extreme step seems to be that God would remove His physical protection from these individuals. Then Satan could attack them in various ways, possibly including sickness, injury or death. From the suffering which this punishment would produce, it was hoped that these people would turn from their sin and repent.

However, we can “deliver to Satan” all we want. But it is only when God, who knows and judges our hearts and

motives, decides that such a thing is good for the one being so punished that He will let it happen. It is God who is protecting all His children. Just because a few decide that one of their number needs punishment, this may not reflect His heart's attitude. The positive thing is that this kind of prayer leaves all discipline in the hands of God. It does not indicate some overt action which the group does to punish someone themselves.

I don't believe any of us should quickly arrive at such a prayer. Even if we do come to this point, it should never be with an attitude of hatred, anger or strife, but with the hope that this medicine would cure and save the one who is being so judged.

Please notice Paul's loving attitude in II Corinthians towards the believer whom he had previously turned over to Satan. It seems that this man who was sleeping with his father's wife had repented. So, immediately Paul was willing to forgive him and receive him back into fellowship. He says: "...you ought rather to forgive and comfort him lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him" (II Cor 2:7,8).

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Over the years in which I have been walking with the Lord, I have heard a lot about "church discipline." Many different groups of Christians have seen fit to throw a brother or sister out of their meetings. The justifications for this are varied, but the practice is always pretty similar. Some brother or sister is ejected from the group and then the rest have nothing more to do with them. The intent here seems to have been to subject the offender to as much emotional pain as possible.

Perhaps the wisest thing I have heard about this subject was spoken to me by an older brother who had about 60 years of experience as a Christian. He said something like this: "In all my years walking with the Lord, I have seen many people thrown out of churches. But with the

passage of time I have never seen one case where it turned out to have been the right thing to do.”

Aside from Paul’s urging the Corinthian believers to pray in a drastic manner to try and rescue a sinning brother through some kind of physical suffering, there is no other admonition in the New Testament which rightly calls for anything which could be called “church discipline.” Nowhere else is any corporate action on the part of the believers called for.

Although we can find admonishments to keep away from those who are walking in sin, there is in no other place the thought of some kind of corporate punishment or discipline of another believer. The only one who ever threw anyone out of the church in the the New Testament was Diotrephes, an action which was clearly against God’s will (III Jn 1:9,10).

CHURCH DISCIPLINE BELONGS TO THE HEAD

My own conclusion is that church discipline belongs with the Head of the church. Jesus is the one who is responsible for any discipline which might take place. Although we do have this one instance of Paul urging some kind of corporate prayer with respect to a sinning brother, it is clear that the response to that prayer remained in the control of God. It was not the brothers who were executing some kind of judgment on another. It still remained in God’s hands.

We have already spoken in the previous chapter about the fact that Jesus did send judgment upon some believers. This was upon those who were eating and drinking their corporate meal in an unworthy manner (I Cor 11:29-30). These men and women were failing to respect and treat others as members of Christ’s body. They did not act towards others as they would act towards Jesus Himself. They failed to “discern” the Lord’s body. Therefore, they became weak, sickly or even died.

In the book of Revelation we have another instance of divine judgment. Jesus warns “Jezebel” and those who are

committing sexual sin with her that if they do not repent, He will “cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation” (Rev 2:22).

No doubt these Revelation verses have deeper spiritual applications beyond a simple instance of adultery, but the message is clear that it is Jesus Himself who will exercise this judgment. He is the one who searches the “minds and the hearts” (Rev 2:23). He is able to discern each one’s motives. Therefore, He and He alone is worthy and capable of executing the judgment that is appropriate when it is needed. Such judgments are much more likely to occur when the work which is going on is His work.

There are a few stories which I have heard which seem to confirm this thought. One of them I will try to recount here. A friend of mine here in Brazil, Geraldo, went to visit South Africa several years ago. He went with a large group of believers to witness a revival which had been taking place among the Zulu tribe. In his perception, this was a genuine work of God. They had no official leadership. It was God Himself who directed their lives and their meetings. Their Christ-centered lives and communion really impressed him. While he was there they told him a story.

About a week before his arrival, a pastor from another church had come to one of their meetings. Since these meetings were open for anyone to give a message or exhortation, this pastor eventually got up to preach. Not long after beginning his message, he fell dead, right in front of everyone. Later, it was learned that he was living in an adulterous situation. It seemed as if God had judged this situation without anyone having to do His work for Him.

I strongly believe that we need to keep our hands off of God’s work. Jesus is the one building His church. He is the One who is anointed to do this task. Let us then follow Him in simple obedience. He will do the rest.

There is no need for us to try to discipline one another. The idea that for any reason we should treat others badly, subjecting them to ridicule, shunning them and convincing others to do the same is really infantile and ridiculous. This will not minister spiritual life to anyone.

If someone sins, we should confront and rebuke them. If they have repented, then we must immediately forgive them. If they are continuing on in sin, then we must pray that God Himself will deal with them in His way. As we lift up these situations to Him, He knows how to, and has the power to, justly deal with them.

Although we do have our part to play, building up the church is really the work of God. It is not something which we do for Him, but something which He does through us. Let us again remember that Jesus said: "I will build My church" (Mt 16:18). As we have seen in the first chapters, He is the source, He is the center, He is the substance, He is the focus, He is the life and He is the Head of everything.

OUR WORKS WILL BE JUDGED

Jesus is the foundation which has been laid. We then are exhorted to be very careful how we build upon this foundation. It is only by building with the substance of Jesus Himself that we can erect anything which will stand the test of eternity.

This is an extremely important admonition. Although many may have not given much thought to what this means or to the results of disobedience in this area, it is an essential factor in our work for God. Each and every believer must have this truth firmly implanted in their minds in such a way that it guides their words, works and behavior.

When Jesus returns He will judge all our works by the burning intensity of His presence. Anything which was not "done in God" (Jn 3:21) will certainly go up in flames. At that time, it will be an extreme embarrassment, a moment of great agony, if we find that many of our efforts were simply expressions of our flesh. If our works for God have been merely a result of our own intelligence, education or abilities, if they were just accomplished by what our natural man could do, if they were just the fruit of human wisdom and effort, at that time the ugliness and ineffectiveness of our rebellious works will be evident before all.

It is therefore incumbent upon each one of us to humble ourselves before Him. We must thoroughly repent of anything and everything which we have been doing which does not have its source in Him. We desperately need to stop from any and all work which is merely wood, hay and stubble. Any effort which is merely human endeavor must be abandoned.

Next we must cultivate an intimacy with Jesus Himself which will become the source of and the inspiration for all our work in His house. We must learn to abide in the vine in such a way that the flowing of His life within us will produce supernatural fruit (Jn 15:5). We need to develop a spiritual communion with our Lord and King which will guide our words, works and steps.

In this way, and only in this way, when we stand before Him on that Day, we will receive an eternal reward. We will not be ashamed, having our works burned up by His presence. We will hear Him say in the presence of the whole watching and waiting universe "Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Mt 25:23).