

THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH

"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Mt 16:18

In this world in which we live, every group of people which gets together or associates with one another has some sort of common ground or foundation upon which to base the relationship of its members. The crowd at a baseball stadium has a common interest in baseball. Those who belong to a fraternal organization may foster a common desire to help their fellow man. Almost anything may be adopted, even if only temporarily, as a basis for people's relationships. Two people waiting for the same bus are a good example of this. To us as Christians, this concept has a very basic and important application. We need to understand clearly what the foundation of the Church is.

If we were going to build a large building, first we would have to lay a proper foundation. This is the most essential ingredient. If a structure is not properly founded—if the foundation is not solid or able to support the structure—it will collapse, or serious problems will result. The same is true of the church of God. If our fellowship one with another, our church meetings, and in general our entire church experience does not rest on the proper foundation, we will have serious problems. Many of the difficulties which the church experiences today can be explained in this way.

One of the most prominent difficulties caused by having an improper foundation is the problem of division. As we have seen, today the Church is divided and splintered into many groups and factions. Not surprisingly, most of these groups and factions have established another foundation for what they are building besides that which God has laid.

The Apostle Paul in his day was very concerned about the foundation of the church. In writing to the Corinthians, the church that had a prominent problem with division in her midst, he speaks about the importance of having a proper foundation. To correct this problem he writes: "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ (I Cor 3:11)." This verse has deep spiritual meaning. It is essential that we adhere exclusively to Jesus Christ as our foundation, our basis and our only rallying point for the building up of the church. If we do not, we will only cause division. Understanding this concept is absolutely crucial if we are to be properly experiencing the church.

Jesus Christ is someone in whom all true Christians agree. We have all knelt before Him and called Him Lord. He, therefore, is our true bond of unity. We have a common basis in Him. As a matter of fact, He is the reason that we even associate one

with another, or that we are even a part of the church at all. He Himself is our true foundation. Therefore, we must be standing firmly upon Him and looking solely to Him as our only bond of unity with other believers.

What then does it mean to lay another foundation? It means that we establish some additional concept, doctrine, teaching, principle or creed as the basis or focal point for our meetings and fellowship one with another. Laying another foundation means that we establish a secondary reason for associating with one another or for meeting with one another than simply that we belong to Jesus Christ.

Establishing another kind of foundation is as common as it is easy. Human beings tend to want and even enjoy something which is outward and tangible. It is easy for us to place our trust in a teaching, concept, belief or even a particular leader. These things are earthly and tangible while Jesus Christ is heavenly and spiritual. Quite often, He is not easy for us to apprehend. Adhering to these outward things is often much simpler than having a right relationship with Him. To have such a relationship we must seek Him, love Him and follow Him every day. In this way, we can have Him as the proper basis for our church experience.

Most Christians desire to be right with God. They want to be pleasing to Him. However, God's enemy may sometimes capitalize on this desire and subtly deceive us. If we can be persuaded that simply believing the right way about some doctrine, teaching, method or "way" will make us right with God, we have been deceived. It may be concerning baptism, unity, evangelism or speaking in tongues. Almost any good scriptural idea can become a source of unscriptural security for us in our church experience. We must not allow the fact that we "believe the right way" about anything but Jesus Christ to become the basis or the assurance of our rightness before God. In the same way, we must not allow these external things to become the basis for our fellowship with other Christians. The fact that they may believe the same way we do about certain things should not become a rallying point or a focal point for our fellowship or meetings. This is laying another foundation. It is against the teaching of God. When we lay another foundation, we automatically exclude some of Christ's own. There will always be someone who cannot agree with the truth which we have seen.

Once we lay another foundation we begin to divide the Church of God. Again we have the situation of one saying, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Christ." These early Christians were laying another basis for their fellowship one with another. They too were establishing a secondary reason for their fellowship one with another. They were dividing into different camps and rallying around something other than Jesus Christ. Such behavior divided the church then and it divides it still today.

In order to have unity, we must have the proper foundation; and this foundation is our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else will do, no matter how good it may seem to be. I know of one group of Christians, for example, who have attempted to base their fellowship on what they called the "ground of unity." They believed that if Christians would only agree to be one in every city and meet together on this basis, unity would result. How subtly appealing this may sound to the human ear. But from God's point of view, this foundation cannot possibly support the church that He is building. Christians cannot even agree about unity.

Foundations of this type are weak and human. God's foundation, Jesus Christ, is secure and everlasting. We can depend on Him. We can rest assured that in Him we have a sure foundation. Though He is invisible and we cannot see Him, yet by faith we know that He is the Rock upon which we stand. If we cleave to Him and to Him alone, we will have the proper basis for our experience of the church.

We must discuss here, in order to have a complete understanding of this subject, the problem of saying, "I am of Christ." This is also a problem that the church of Corinth was having. There is a great deal of difference between basing our fellowship on Jesus Christ and saying, "I am of Christ" in an exclusive way. What this group of Corinthian believers was doing was separating themselves from other brethren who did not understand that Jesus Christ was the only foundation of the church. They perhaps thought something like this: "These other brothers are saying they are of Paul, or they are of Apollos; but we are of Jesus Christ—we are doing things the right way. We are more enlightened! Therefore, we are not of these other people. We will not be with them and we will not fellowship with them because they are wrong." Excluding other brethren who are wrong about certain things is a tremendous problem today. This is a problem of saying, "I am of Christ."

Once we see that Jesus Christ is the only proper foundation for the church, we must live in this light. Yet we must be careful not to divide ourselves from, or exclude other brethren from our midst who do not have this spiritual understanding. This is to make the same mistake as the early Corinthians and to say "I am of Christ." All believers are of Jesus Christ. We have been born of Him, we are begotten by Him, and we must stand firmly upon Him as our foundation. Yet to exclude other brethren who have laid a different foundation is wrong and divisive and disrupts the unity in the church.

It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of having the proper foundation for our experience of the church life. Without it we can only promote confusion and division. We must agree that God knows what He is doing. He has established Jesus Christ as the solid and sure foundation for our building. Let us cling to Him and establish ourselves firmly upon Him so that when things begin to be shaken, what we have been building will remain.

When we build upon another foundation, we begin to build something other than the church. Once we establish another basis for our meetings and our church experience, whatever we build upon it cannot be pleasing to God. Jesus Christ is the one with whom the Father is well pleased (Matt 17:5). Whatever we can do or whatever we can produce outside of Him, no matter how good it may seem to be, does not satisfy the Father. In the Bible we read that our righteousness is as filthy rags to Him (Is 64:6). In another place we read about many people appearing before the throne of God and claiming to have done many wonderful works in Jesus' name. Yet we find God Himself disavowing them and what they had done (Matt 7:22-23).

We should take earnest heed therefore to what we are doing and have a certain amount of fear within us that what we are producing for God would really be of God. Apart from Him we may be able to establish and build up some kind of "religious" organization. Perhaps we may achieve great membership and have many enjoyable activities. Yet, if we have been constructing all this on any kind of foundation other than Jesus Christ, it is worth nothing. And it is not really the church which we have been building.

The church is not a religious social club or some kind of spiritual toastmaster's organization. The church is the living body of Jesus Christ. She is a wonderful, spiritual building which God is constructing. How essential it is that when we are building with Him—and the Bible says that we are laborers together with God—that we are building according to His blueprint and His plan. It should be one of our greatest concerns that when we appear before Him, our work would be found to be approved.

If, through His mercy, God enlightens us and exposes us about any of the

activities with which we are involved, we should be careful to heed Him. We should be willing to stop anything and everything we might be doing which is not on a firm foundation of Jesus Christ alone. There may be a great need for us to disentangle ourselves from the web of spiritual unreality and renew our hearts toward God. May we not be tempted to justify anything which God has not ordained and is not according to His scriptures. Our part is rather to humble ourselves before God, confess our sin and our blindness, and begin to work according to His will.

Yet some may say, "What is so terrible about division? Of necessity, the people of God will always have to meet in many different places. What is all the fuss about other foundations?" Since questions such as these are very likely to be raised, let us study the answer carefully.

Jesus Christ is living in His body. By His life, He is causing all the members of His body to function and to build one another up. It is through the functions and ministries of all the members that the body is built up and perfected. According to Ephesians 4:16, the body is built up by "that which every joint supplieth." When Christ's body is splintered and divided up among many different groups, factions and denominations, this supply of life from each member to the others is interrupted. In this way, the daily ministering one to another which is necessary for our growth is hindered and the body damaged.

Another problem that division causes is that it stifles the expression of Jesus Christ on the earth. Since we, the believers in Christ, are to be expressing Him to the world, we need to be experiencing unity. Just as the human body, if it were to be divided up in many parts, would be unable to properly show forth the life which it contains, so it is with the body of Christ. When all the members of His body are fragmented and separated one from another, the full expression of His life is damaged. How can the unbelieving world be expected to see Christ, with all His love and glory, when His children are fighting and arguing with one another?

Perhaps some may think they are doing just fine in a divided state. This only shows that they have little understanding of the body of Christ. Although our experience may be good and God is doing some work in our midst, perhaps we should consider how much more He could be doing if only we would allow Him to work through us in the way of unity. What a glorious expression of His life there would be! How much more He could be seen and outpoured in our midst. And, how much more of a powerful effect the church could have on the unbelieving world today. The conversion of sinners and the saving of souls would be the abundant fruit of such glorious unity.

Let us not be deceived into thinking that what we have experienced is all there is. God is able to do much more than we ask or think. If only we will align ourselves with His will and commit our lives to obey Him in what He is doing, we will begin to experience unity with all Christians in His body.