

No Other Foundation

By Luke L. Keefer, Jr.*

In the mid 1530's Menno Simons felt called of God to minister among the Anabaptists of Holland and ultimately to become a leading minister among them. Over-zealous Anabaptist prophets had caused many followers to take over the city of Muenster and try to jump-start the Kingdom of God upon earth by destroying God's enemies. Many perished as the bishop's armies recaptured the city, executed the leaders, dealt severely with the misguided Anabaptists, and reestablished order in the city. Simons felt called to collect the scattered sheep and restore them to Christ's order. He felt their leaders had deceived the innocent in getting them to leave the true foundation in Christ and to try to build the church upon a false foundation. Over time he brought many back to the true foundation, but he did more. He repaired the tarnished image of the Anabaptists in the Netherlands. In fact, he succeeded so well in getting new converts into the Anabaptist fellowship that the Anabaptists (who would later be called Mennonites in honor of his name) became the largest Protestant Church in Holland until the early 17th century, when the Reformed movement became the dominate faith in Holland. Having the right foundation, Christ Jesus, is the key to building a faithful church. Simons knew this truth, and used I Cor. 3:11 as his signature mark upon every treatise he published. His story inspires the title I have chosen for my remarks.

I. Christ is the Foundation of Ministry

I believe you already share this conviction, so I shall not try to justify its truthfulness. What is surprising about this assertion is the context that led Paul to declare it. Corinth was both spiritually gifted and torn apart by division and strife. This unleashed leadership tensions at Corinth, and Paul was at the middle of it. It was probably Paul's worst ministry problem of his entire career. I & II Corinthians read like his personal diary. One page reveals him to be so low that he despairs of life itself. The next day he exalts in the all-sufficient grace of Christ.

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Now, the point of it all is this. Corinth is one example of every place and every time. I have the task of announcing to you on this joyous day: “Get ready Corinth has an appointment with you.” Why? All of us have egos, and sooner or later we will be clashing with other egos in the church. Now, it is right in the middle of a discussion about leadership conflicts in the church that Paul asserts that the only foundation for ministry is Jesus Christ, whom he has already described in the preceding chapters as Christ crucified. How does Christ crucified relate to leadership struggles in the church? It relates because of Jesus’ instruction of the disciples concerning the appropriate style of ministry.

In Mark chapters 8-10 Jesus spells out the nature of servant ministry. The incidents in these three chapters are somewhat bizarre. As soon as Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, all hell breaks loose among the twelve. In chapter 9 the disciples actually argue about which of them is the greatest. Jesus responds by talking more clearly about his upcoming death in Jerusalem. In chapter 10 James and John try to get Jesus to promise them the two top positions in his kingdom. Jesus has had enough! He takes his disciples aside and explains the difference between servant leadership, exemplified by his willingness to lay down his life for the salvation of others, and the type of lordship rule which the Gentiles (read Rome) exercises. Rome’s leaders strove for the top position, used power indiscriminately, and put down all rivals with violent force. The disciples did not get the message of servant leadership at that point of the story, but they did get it after the resurrection and Pentecost. Paul must have received it from them because his ideas about leadership are so close to Jesus’ teaching in Mark 8-10.

His difficult experience at Corinth made him apply this model to himself, as one of the people involved in the plot. In chapter 4 (verse 6) he applies this lesson of servanthood to Corinth, to Apollos, and to himself and other ministers caught up in this conflict. Verse 1 of chapter 4 leaves no doubt about his conclusion: he and Apollos are merely servants of Christ. The people must consider them in that light, and he and Apollos must line up with Jesus’ model of servant ministry. That is why he asserts that Jesus, the crucified one, is the foundational model of ministry and leadership.

Now, all this would be wonderful if we could just resolve to be servant leaders and everything else just fell into place. But, I want to have you look at a picture that tells us that it is hard to keep ministry and ministers on the true foundation.¹ If you go just beyond the old Roman Forum area in the city of Rome you will see Trajan’s Column. It has that name even though the statue atop the column is St. Peter. If we look closely at the column below Peter, we will see that the entire column is a table of Trajan’s military exploits that gained

him fame and eventually the Emperor's crown. The city guide on our Ashland Theological Seminary tour in 1998 told us that this column signified the triumph of Christianity over the evil, persecuting Roman Empire. My memories of church history told me that this superficial interpretation was not supported by the facts. At a deeper level it contradicts what Jesus taught in Mark 10.

Lordship and servanthood are polar opposites. They cannot be mixed and blended. If we have 49% lordship rule and 51% servanthood ministry, we do not have a legitimate Christian ministry. You can't have servanthood unless you completely renounce lordship. Embrace lordship in any degree and you have turned your back on the way of Jesus. In other words, your ministry will have slipped from the true foundation to a false one.

This is one factor that makes ministry hard; it is a style of leadership that means dying with Christ. For no matter how hard you try to be a servant, you will meet people—parishioners, board members, supervisory clergy, and even fellow ministers—who don't play by the same rules. By default or by design they are "power mongers." It will seem like you are a lamb among wolves. What shall you do? Organize a power group of your own to fight back or overthrow these people. No, because then you get off the true foundation and play the power game by their rules.

Instead, you stick to servant leadership and employ the strategy of Jesus, what Tom Sine calls the "mustard seed conspiracy." You plant tiny seeds of mustard that in due time become great plants. You hide yeast in the bread dough and let it make the bread rise and take the shape of a loaf. You take Jesus' advice and let your light shine, and stand amazed at how a small candle can defeat the darkness. You become salt that dissolves in the food it is flavoring, but makes the dish tasty and memorable. Jesus' servanthood model enables you to deal with powerful giants and bring them down in the name of the Lord. Servanthood Paul says is the way to minister in church conflicts. It is the one true foundation: Christ crucified is the pattern for ministry.

Paul wants to build the Temple, the house of the Lord in his Corinthian letter. The foundation is crucial, but it takes more to construct God's building. Old Sarum, just a few miles from Salisbury, England makes visual the next point I wish to make.² You can see the old castle mound where the local prince once lived, as did also the bishop of the cathedral next to the castle mound. The prince and the bishop had a conflict that caused them to part ways. The bishop moved to Salisbury and decided to build a new cathedral church. He had his builders bring the stone from Old Sarum to Salisbury to construct his new church. Today, nearly 800 years later, Salisbury is still one of the most magnificent cathedrals in England.

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All that is now left of Old Sarum is the stone foundation. A foundation alone is not sufficient for God's house. Walls are also needed. In Paul's discussion in I Cor. 3, he moves directly from the laying of the foundation to the construction of the walls. Here he addresses the character of a minister: the motives and the methods that characterize one's ministry.

II. The Methods (Character) of a Minister

Let's think first of the two sets of materials he mentions: the good kind which include gold, silver, and costly stones. This set is contrasted to the inferior group of wood, hay, and straw. What distinguishes these two sets of building materials from each other? The first group is costly material; the second is cheap. The first group lists durable materials; the other is subject to decay. Finally, the one is aesthetically pleasing; the other is not.

Imagine going into a cathedral and seeing here and there a block of wood where a stone should be, or a bale of hay instead of a marble stone, or tufts of straw filling up a space between two stones where there should be mortar. Would the view satisfy the artist within you? Would you feel safe in that church in stormy weather? Would you insure that building with long-term coverage if you were a business person? These are rhetorical questions and you know the answer.

Now, in just the same way, our character shapes our ministry. If you are a lazy person, you will be a lazy minister. If you cut corners on everything you do, you will cut corners in your ministry. If you are content to purchase inferior goods just because they cost less, you'll be cheap in your ministry. It takes more than being on the right foundation to be faithful in ministry. You have to carefully lay the walls one stone at a time.

At various times in the Corinthian letters Paul castigates those who would be ministers who work from base motives and use deceitful methods. He tells how careful he has been ministering, going beyond the required standards, to minister for Christ's glory and not from motives of accumulating money. He would rather tell people the truth and have them dislike him than to give deceitful messages that will please his hearers.

A minister of good character is like one of the stone masons of the Medieval cathedrals. Character has been defined as the person you are when no one is looking. The Medieval stone cutters and carvers put the same careful work into figures that would be placed a hundred or more feet from the ground as they did the ones that people could touch. These stones would never be seen clearly from the ground, and many were completely hidden from sight. The

masons did their work to please God, the only one who had their work in his view. Ministers with character do the same.

Paul knew that a minister's job as the builder of God's house would be subjected to the test of fire. That could be the fire of one's own accusing conscience, the fire of criticism from those under his ministry, or the ultimate fire of God's judgment. He determined to minister so that he would not suffer the loss of reputation or reward.

Have you ever gone to a party and then discovered that you were expected to bring a gift. That is what it will feel like if we are one of those whose works are burnt up at the last day. On the one hand, we will want to thank God for his grace and mercy that saved us. But there will not be anything in our hand that we can give Christ in thanks for his love.

So if we want some gift for God, we must start to purchase it now. We must allow God to crucify us to the world and to its values and methods. We must seek the power of Christ's resurrection to raise our character up to the standards He has set before us. We must allow the Holy Spirit to be the fire of the Lord that sweeps through our lives and burns out the character defects that are an offense to God and to the ministry entrusted to us.

Paul has spoken to us about laying the foundations and raising the walls of God's house. But he then leaves his metaphor of the building and goes on to other topics. I would like to suggest a way to complete his building with a roofing structure. I once had the chance to take the roof walk at Salisbury Cathedral. The second stop on the tour brings you to a location beneath the roof and above the ceiling. There you see the medieval trusses that hold up the ceiling below and the enormous weight of the roof above. I think of this when I pause to consider what Paul said about preaching the word of the Lord. And that brings us to our third metaphor.

III. The Heart of our Message is Christ Crucified

Paul admits that his preaching is not eloquent by the world's standards. He does not have the oral gifts that some others have, especially Apollos. But he does know how to preach by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. And he knows how to set forth Christ crucified as the power that demolishes human opposition to the gospel. Some consider the cross to be foolish and weak; Paul believes it is the wisdom and strength of God.

It is at this point that Paul brings two themes together that he has developed separately throughout both letters. It is almost as if we are watching Paul sew two pieces of cloth together. One moment his needle is above the cloth and he talks of ministry and its proper execution. The next moment his

needle is beneath the cloth and he is talking about knowledge or wisdom. He binds both subjects together by the single thread of Christ crucified.

I want to look at this theme of knowledge in a very brief sketch. There are two types of knowledge: worldly wisdom and its opposite, the knowledge of God. The one is the human love of knowledge for its own sake (or to be more precise, knowledge for the sake of ego enhancement). The other is the knowledge of love. The first, Paul says, puffs up. It draws attention to one's self. And it is mostly concerned to impress others with what one knows. The other seeks to glorify God and build people up in the knowledge of God. Years ago James Denny made this observation about preaching: in the pulpit we cannot simultaneously demonstrate that we are clever and that God is wonderful. We will do one or the other, but we can't do both.

And that observation brings a story to mind that Ian Maclaren includes in his book *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush*, a collection of 19th century stories from the highlands of Scotland. He personally knew the young ministerial graduate in the story so he protects the young man's privacy by only using his first name, John.

John had recently completed his university training and had just been called to his first pulpit in a village church. He was an outstanding student and won awards for his scholarship. As he moved into the manse he was trying to be modest and not expecting a call to an Edinburgh parish for at least two years. He had just completed his first sermon draft and had a glow of satisfaction as he read it aloud.

Being a bachelor, his aunt had agreed to move into the manse with him and be his housekeeper. When he came downstairs for his evening meal on Friday, she had a chat with him about his first sermon. She had been praying for him and his first service. She asked him if he remembered the deathbed scene with his mother just five years ago. Mother and son had a close bond of affection between them because his father had died years earlier. His mother had clutched his hand in hers and begged of him that if ever God called him into ministry he would remember "to speak a good word for Jesus." The aunt told him she had every confidence in him that he would do well. But she expressed a concern for the common people of his parish, fearing that he might speak over their heads.

After supper and dishes were over, they went their separate ways to their rooms, the aunt to pray for him and he to a relaxing evening of reading his books. He saw his sermon manuscript on the desk, and that brought him back to the request of his dying mother. Twice he started to crumple its pages, and

twice he smoothed them out again. And then he fell to his knees and prayed like he had not prayed in a long time.

The next morning being Saturday, he faced the daunting task of preparing a new sermon; the old manuscript now was ashes in his fireplace. His aunt assured him that God would give him a new one. He asked how she could be so confident about that. She merely replied, "My room is above yours and I heard you pray last night." He got his message as his aunt said he would.

On Sunday morning the church was crowded. Everyone wanted to hear the new minister who came with such a good reputation preceding him. In fact, half the people from the Church of Scotland came too, eager to hear the new preacher in town. He was humble and he was scared; when he led the congregation in the Lord's Prayer he missed two whole petitions of the prayer. But once he began to preach, it was as one who had found new life. An awesome silence fell upon the congregation. There was an unmistakable sense of the presence of God. Maclaren was sitting next to the young man's aunt. He couldn't remember many details in later years about the message other than its topic—it was about Christ. Maclaren mentions notable preachers of the time, including Charles Spurgeon, whom he had personally heard. The young minister's sermon stood up well against the outstanding preachers of the time. As his aunt summed up the incident the following day, "Aye, laddie, that was your mother's sermon." He had "said a good word for Jesus."

Now, you may ask, how is a sermon like a cathedral ceiling? I'll tell you. In our visit to Rome in 1998 we got to see the Sistine Chapel and the magnificent ceiling Michelangelo had painted. When people enter the chapel, they get silent, and they look up, for a very long time—until their necks begin to hurt. They change places in the chapel to relieve their neck and to see different features of the masterpiece. They don't want to be disturbed, and they ignore your urgent signs that we must move on or we will miss our scheduled time to tour St. Peter's Cathedral.

Well, that is what happens when you "speak a good word for Jesus." At some point in the message you become of secondary importance, the outward voice of the Lord. The people of faith are drawn upward in their hearts. They are gazing upon the living God and listening to the voice that raised the dead into new life. The message of Christ crucified provides the ceiling and the roof for the house of God just as it provided its true foundation and its sturdy walls.

Conclusion

I want to finish with one last picture. Wells Cathedral is located in southwest England. Its western front is filled with more statues than any other

church in England.³In medieval times it was a pilgrimage church. As the faithful traveler crested the last hill, the western end was the sight that filled their vision. The people of the time believed that pilgrimage depicted the life of a Christian in search of the heavenly sanctuary. These people on the front of the church were like the cloud of witnesses that cheered them on their way and bid them to enter the sanctuary, which was a copy of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Old and New Testament saints are on the bottom tier of this cloud of witnesses. The kings, queens, and other notable people who promoted the Christian faith in England form the next several tiers. Then we come to the level of the angels and archangels. Above them are the apostles, with St. Andrew, the patron saint, in the middle. He holds the cross of Christ like the letter X in English, but it represents the χ of the Greek word *Christos* (Christ). Even here Christ crucified is still the central note. And finally there is Christ, seated in splendor and in judgment. If you can see it with the help of proper lenses, his one hand is raised in a sign of blessing. The other one is extended in a gesture of welcome.

As we leave this place today, we go as pilgrims. We will not say, "Goodbye." For we expect to meet again (in person, or by telephone, letters, or emails). And we will bear each other up with words of encouragement and acts of kindness. At one moment we will be one of the pilgrims. At another we will be in the great crowd of witnesses cheering on the pilgrims who are running toward the door of God's house.

We will meet again. We are certain of that, and that is why we say, "Fare-well" (may it go well with you until we meet again). In the meantime, let us remember to "speak a good word for Jesus"!

ENDNOTES

¹ A picture of Trajan's Column can be found on the internet. Try a Google Search under Wikipedia.org, for example. First, look at the entire column with St. Peter at the top. Then get a close-up view of the column where Trajan's war victories are depicted.

² Find the picture of Old Sarum at the same computer site. Look for the photo which clearly shows the complete pattern of the Cathedral foundation.

³ Locate Wells Cathedral at the same site. Study its western front.