

Exposition

THEMELIOS

Themelios will regularly carry an article expounding some Biblical passage or theme. Appropriately, the first of these expositions concerns the passage from which our title comes. Dr McKelvey was born in Ireland and studied at the Universities of Nottingham and Oxford, and at Western Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh. He is on the staff of the African seminary, Adams Theological School, now at Modderpoort, South Africa.

by R. J. McKelvey

Ancients, with lively and picturesque imaginations, were at least as fond of using words in a metaphoric sense as we moderns are. Particularly amenable to figurative use was the word foundation, both classical and Biblical writers employ it figuratively. The Biblical writers apparently found it a convenient way of expressing the fundamental fact that belief in God (or Christ) is the sure basis of existence. The outstanding use of the word in this connection, and the one which lies behind most of the figurative uses of *themelios* in the New Testament, is Isaiah 28 : 16. Behold, I am laying in Zion for a

foundation (*themelia*) a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation (*themelia*). The early Christians were quick to seize upon the words, seeing in them an allusion to Jesus Christ and His church (1 Pet. 2. 4-5; Rom. 9. 32-33; Eph. 2. 20). We are concerned with the use of *themelios* in Ephesians 2. 20. The context of Eph. 2. 20 (vv. 11-19) describes the new status which the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has conferred upon the Gentiles. Formerly they were "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of

promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (v. 12). Now however (*nuni de*, v. 13) they have been brought "near" (v. 13), and, with Jewish converts, enjoy access to God the common Father (v. 18). For Christ has created peace by abolishing the racial barrier, thereby creating one new race (v. 14).¹ Up to this point (v. 18) Paul has been thinking of the new society of converted Jews and Gentiles in terms of his favourite image for the church, namely, the body (*soma*, v. 16; cf. 1. 23). Now (v. 19) he pauses to summarize, and, as if not satisfied with his statement on the new standing of the Gentiles, he introduces further images:

So then (*oun*) you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens' (*sumpolitai*, from *polis*, city) with the saints² and members of the household (*oikeioi*, from *oikos*, house) of God . . . (v. 19) But no sooner has the apostle used the word *oikeios* than he passes imperceptibly into the circle of images associated with the idea of house:

(You are) built (*epoikodomeisthai*) upon the foundation (*themelios*) of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone (*akrogoniaios*), in whom the whole structure (*pasa oikodome*) is joined together (*sunarmologeisthai*)³ and grows into a holy temple (*naos*) in the Lord; in whom you also are built (*sunoikodomeisthai*) into it for a dwelling place (*katoikterion*) of God in the Spirit (vv. 21-22). Behind this profusion of images lies one dominant conception, namely, that of the church as a building in the course of construction.⁴ In this

building Gentile and Jewish converts are built side by side and together form a dwelling place for God (cf. 1 Cor. 3. 16-17; 2 Cor. 6.16-7.1; 1 Pet. 2. 4-8. Cf. 1 Cor. 6. 19-20). Although this temple is still in the course of construction and its completion lies in the future, God nevertheless dwells in it – such is his gracious condescension – and because he does, it is a perfect temple and lacking in no respect.

That part of the temple which interests us is the foundation. Paul has already used the term *themelios* in connection with *oikodom* and *naos* in 1 Cor. 3. 9-17, where he also describes the church. There is something in common between the use of *themelios* in 1 Cor 3 and its use in Eph. 2. 20 in so far as the apostle is thinking of those who are the foundation (Christ in 1 Cor. 3 and the apostles and prophets in Eph. 2), but there the correspondence ceases, and in 1 Cor. 3 Paul proceeds to discuss those who build upon the foundation and what they build, whereas in Eph. 2 he is thinking rather of those who are built upon the foundation. What does Paul mean when he says (Eph. 2. 20) that the Gentiles are "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone"? He means that their membership rests upon the bed-rock of the historic faith. The "apostles" Paul has in mind may refer to the twelve or to apostles in the wider sense (e.g. Rom. 16. 7; Acts 14. 14). It would be easier to tell which it is if we knew whether the "prophets" are Old or New Testament figures. If they are Old Testament prophets

then “apostles” will more naturally refer to the apostles *par excellence*, i.e., the twelve. Some support for this interpretation is suggested by the fact the foundation has already been laid and building operations are proceeding. The apostles referred to then cannot be a continuing class in the church. Taking the “apostles” to refer to the twelve then we may note the affinity between the thought of our text and that of Matthew 16. 18. There our Lord addresses Peter as *the representative of the twelve*, and designates him the rock (petra) upon which he will build (oikodomein) his church. The parallel should not be pressed however,⁵ for strictly speaking Peter is likened not to a part of the building (the foundation) but to the rock on which the building stands.⁶ If we want a true parallel for themelios in Eph. 2. 20 we should go to Revelation 20. 14, where the heavenly Jerusalem, the heavenly dwelling of God (21. 2-3), has for its foundations the twelve apostles.

The “prophets” of Eph. 2. 20 are understood by most commentators to mean New Testament prophets (cf. 4. 11; and (?) 3. 5). Prophets, we know were one of the first orders of ministry in the early church (Acts 11. 27; 13. 1 etc). Paul will therefore be affirming what he has already said, namely, that the inclusion of Gentiles in the church is based fairly and squarely upon primitive Christianity. I am inclined, however, to take the “prophets” to mean Old Testament persons. This interpretation gives still greater point to Paul’s statement: the inclusion of the Gentiles not only rests upon historic Christianity (the apostles); it is the

fulfilment of ancient prophecy (Eph. 2. 17 = Isa. 57. 19; cf. Eph. 3. 4-6). Either way, the meaning of Paul’s words is in no doubt: the Gentile believers have a sure and great foundation.

But Paul is not content to leave the matter there. Hard experience had shown him that there were those who, while obliged to acknowledge the admission of Gentiles to the covenant people of God as the will of God, regarded them as something of “second-class” Christians. So to the words “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” Paul adds “of which (genitive absol. *ontos*) Christ Jesus himself is the chief cornerstone (akrogoniaios).”⁷ Akrogoniaios is juxtaposed with themelios in Isa. 28. 16 and the new thought would come easily to Paul’s mind. What he is saying is that the Gentiles are not only based upon the prophets and apostles, but, what is more important still, upon Christ. The thought of the text at this point approximates to that of 1 Cor. 3. 11; Christ is a stone at the foot of the building.⁸ But there is more to Paul’s designating Christ the cornerstone. In ancient buildings cornerstones, which were of considerable size, not only supported the superstructure, but also served to unify it (sunarmologeîn, 2. 21; cf. 4. 16).⁹ In other words, the ongoing life of the Gentiles in the church (“the whole structure . . . in whom you also (kai) are built”), no less than their inception, is of Christ.

To be built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets of which Christ Jesus himself is the chief cornerstone then is to be built upon the foundation which *is* the apostles

and prophets, and not, as some commentators take it to mean (cf. 1 Cor. 3. 10 ff), the foundation that *is laid* by the apostles and prophets (*genitivus auctoris*). Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ are every bit as much God’s people as Jewish converts, for their membership rests upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets of which Christ is the chief cornerstone. To put the matter otherwise, the Gentile converts also belong to the “apostolic succession.”¹⁰ Such is the mystery made known to the apostle of the Gentiles – “how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3. 6). Behind this meaning of themelios in our text it is probably permissible to find a secondary meaning. The image suggests a distinction between the apostles and prophets (the foundation) and other Christians (the superstructure, the “living stones” of 1 Pet. 2. 5). If “apostles” refers to the twelve, i.e., not a continuing class, then Eph. 2. 20 sheds some light on the *crux interpretum* of Matt. 16. 18 ff. The foundation refers to the twelve in their unique and unrepeatable apostolic capacity as companions of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 1. 21-22). Whatever else Peter and his fellow apostles may pass on to others, that they cannot pass on. It is no more possible to do so than to add one foundation on top of another.¹¹

NOTES

(1.) Note the corresponding “one new man” (2. 15), the “one body” (v. 16), and the “one Spirit” (v. 18). Cf. also

4. 4. – (2.) Hoi hagioi refers not just to Jewish Christians (so M. Dibelius, *An die Kolosser, Epheser, an Philemon* 1953, p. 71) or to Christians in heaven (so G. Stählin, TWNT, V, p. 29 and others), but generally to Israel kata pneuma (F. Mussner, *Christus, das All und die Kirche, Studien zur Theologie des Epheserbriefes*, 1955, p. 105. – (3.) Sunarmologeisthai is probably a *terminus technicus* for the working of the end of one stone so as to fit the corresponding side of another (J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 262.) – (4.) In the New Testament oikodome refers to the *process* of building rather than to the edifice itself, whether the word is used in the sense of construction (1 Cor. 3. 10 ff; Eph. 2. 20; 4. 12, 16) or of edification (1 Cor. 14. 3ff, 12; 2 Cor. 10. 8; 12. 19; 13. 10; Rom. 14. 19). See at length P. Vielhauer, *Oikodome*, 1939; P. Bonnard, *Jesus-Christ édifiant son Église*, 1948. – (5.) As O. Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, ET 1953, pp. 217f, is inclined to do. Cf. A. Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, 1958, pp. 309, who takes *petra* of Matt. 16. 18 to refer to a foundation-stone. – (6.) Cf. E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 1955, p. 163. (7.) Cf. E. Haupt, *Die Gefangenschaftsbriefe*, 1897, p. 95, following H. von Soden. – (8.) Some modern commentators take akrogoniaios to refer to a stone at the top of the building, but such an interpretation is quite out of keeping with the thought of the context, in particular the conjunction of akrogoniaios with Themelios. – (9.) A. Fridrichsen is of the opinion that the cornerstone joins the two adjacent walls of the building (“Themelios, I Kor. 3. 11,” Th. Z. (1946), p. 316. Is it too fanciful to suppose with Theodoret (PG 82, 525) and Calvin (comm. on Eph. 2, CR. 174-6) that the two walls represent the Jews and the Gentiles? – (10.) Cf. the thought of Gal. 3. 29. – (11.) Cf. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 209.