

THE FOUNDATION, CHARACTER, AND DESIGN OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST.

A SERMON PREACHED BEFORE THE MAR-TIME BAPTIST CONVENTION, ASSEMBLED IN THE EDIFICE OF THE FIRST YARMOUTH BAPTIST CHURCH, AUGUST 21ST, 1881, BY REV. J. E. HOPPER, A.M., AND PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE CONVENTION.

"Built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone, in whom all the building fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."—Eph. 2: 20-22.

When God created the world it was with the design that it should be the abode of man. This he has shown in that he created man last, rested from his work, and has not brought any other order of beings into existence to lord it over him. In all that preceded man's creation there was a prophecy of a higher order of life coming, to which the forms that were passing and passed away were merely preparatory.

The material is the mirror of the spiritual. All the marvellous works of God's grace look onward to an end, even this, that lost man saved by Christ's death shall, through the Holy Spirit, become the habitation of God. The eternal Father in the fullness of the ages, and in the completion of the work of redemption, shall fully and gloriously take possession of his living temple. If in the first creation when worlds and varied forms of life came from the hand of God we see his power and wisdom, in the second creation in all the progressive stages up to completion, we see the amazing love and grace of God.

Let us examine this building of God in the characteristics Paul, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, gave of it in the passage under consideration.

I. THE FOUNDATION OF THE BUILDING. It is that "of the apostles and prophets." How are we to understand the phrase? Is it that the apostles and prophets were the foundation? Certainly not, for Paul has distinctly affirmed (1 Cor. 3: 5), "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed," and again in the eleventh verse, "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid which is Jesus Christ." The apostles and prophets were not the foundation; but they laid it in the preaching of Christ. The only passage seemingly inharmonious with this is Rev. 21: 14, where it said the Heavenly Jerusalem had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb. But it must be borne in mind that this is not a dogmatic passage but a highly figurative one, and at most only asserts that the foundations bore the names of the Apostles. That Paul used our text in the sense of our interpretation is evident from his statement in Rom. 15: 20, where he says he: "Strove to preach the gospel not where Christ was named lest he should build upon another man's foundation." And if the Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews be admitted he there makes a similar statement in the sixth chapter and first verse: Leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection not laying again the foundation of repentance, &c."

But Christ himself in that notable passage so strangely perverted by the Romish church emphasises our interpretation, (Matt. 16: 18.) "Thou art Petros and upon the Petra I will build my church." The Petra referring to Peter's confession in the 16th verse, "Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God." Upon such preaching as this Christ will build his church.

Christ as well as Paul gives the highest honor to preaching, and exalts its worth far above creeds, edicts of councils, and traditions of the Fathers.

The means by which the God has ordained to bring back the world to lawful allegiance is by selecting saved men to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ and that there is redemption through his blood. It is probable that God for the effecting of his purposes has chosen the best means to secure the end. The higher orders have been passed by. The thrones, dominions, principalities, powers, and all other angelic life, though possessed of greater power and wisdom, doubtless would have lacked adaptation for such a work. A bond of sympathy exists between a saved man and an unsaved one such as is peculiar to those of the same order of creation. This power of sympathy is all important, so much so, that it behooved Christ to be made like unto his brethren that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest, and to suffer being tempted so as to be able to succour them that are tempted. Saved men, called of God, feel often how inadequate they are to meet demands of their calling and often exclaim: "Who is sufficient for these things," and only learn obedience in the assurance: "Our sufficiency is of God. Without any overestimate we may safely affirm that men are the best of all ambassadors for God when the message is to be given to men. We may talk of the power of the press and other agencies for the dissemination of truth, but after all they are puny beside the living voice. If it could have answered the purpose adequately God could have hastened the invention of printing and have employed it. But in no way can a sinner be made to feel the enormity of his sins, and the love of God as by listening to one who has been snatched as a brand from the burning, telling of what he has felt and experienced of sin's scourge and Christ's Salvation. As words, warm from a heart deeply stirred, strike upon the careless hearer, they at once command attention and awaken feeling. All other means are subordinate and auxiliary to this central and preeminent one in the plan and

purpose of God. We cannot overestimate the necessity for preachers of the word, nor for the increase of their efficiency by the acquisition of all the helps which a beneficent God has rendered available.

And whilst it must be made prominent that God requires men to be preachers, it is equally important that we recognize the divine purpose in reference to bringing in lost men into his kingdom to be secured by the preaching of the gospel—not something like it, or contrary to it; but the old truth of a crucified and risen Savior—the end of the law for righteousness. This proclamation God will not suffer to return to him void. Results blessed, and permanent must be accomplished by it, for it is God's appointed means to gather in his elect. The world may despise it just as it did in Apostolic times—it may cry out with the Greeks for wisdom, but God will, by the foolishness of preaching, save them that believe, and save them in such numbers and so wonderfully show his power in the saved, that false systems shall topple and fall as aforetime.

In these days of specious theories, elegant sophisms, and oppositions of science falsely so called, it becomes the heralds of the cross to know what message He would have them declare, and declare it, whether men will hear or forbear. An Athenian curiosity demanding some new thing must not divert us from the purpose of our calling, and should the progressive spirit of the age demand a progression in Christian doctrines, or their adulteration, we must give way to it, no, not for an hour, that the truth of the gospel may continue with you. The gospel as given by Christ and his Apostles was complete, and whilst change must mark the incomplete, the knowledge of this world, we shall show the greatest wisdom in getting back to primitive purity, and laying the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets.

Let us have more confidence in and clothe with increased power the God ordained means of grace. Our difficulty is that too often we offer to men from the pulpit and the prayer meeting, a stone instead of bread—a cold formality instead of a living Christ—a frigid utterance of threadbare statements instead of the warm utterances of a heart filled with love to Christ and lost men. As sparsely as possible let us get back to Apostolic doctrine, apostolic ordinances, and apostolic love and zeal. Paul warned night and day with tears. The record of our labors I fear will be in striking contrast because of the want of time given to the work, and the absence of that feeling earnestness which should characterize the exhortations and prayers of saved men, for men who are lost to all eternity, unless the gospel is believed and obeyed.

The word of God in some places represents God the Father as laying the foundation of the church in giving his Son, Is. 28: 16. "Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation, a stone a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation." Paul says in 1 Cor. 3: 10, According to the grace of God which is given unto me as a wise Master-builder, I have laid the foundation. Paul's method of laying the foundation was by preaching and glorying only in the cross of Christ. These two representations of Isaiah and Paul are but two phases of the same subject and truth. Prominence is given in our text however, not so much to the fact of Christ being the foundation, as the chief corner stone—the principle part of the building that binds it together, and gives solidity to the structure. The living historical Christ enters into God's building. How noble must be that edifice which has for its head corner stone, God manifest in the flesh. What a glory is placed upon saved man, in placing him in a building of which Christ forms a part. O marvellous grace that the Creator and heavens king should so identify himself with man! The whole building shall stand because earth and hell cannot destroy that chief corner stone. Worms of the dust are we, but God has seen fit to put forth his hand and place us who trust in him in this building. What strong assurance of preserving grace is ours when we know the beauty and symmetry of the entire edifice would be marred, if any of the stones, columns, shafts, or capitals, should fall from their place. In matchless beauty, unmarred, shall the building stand forth in that day when the great voice out of heaven shall proclaim "the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God."

II. THE CHARACTER OF THE BUILDING. It is "a fully framed together," and "groweth unto an holy temple." It pays to get a good foundation, to dig deep, and erect an edifice in accordance with approved methods. In reference to spiritual building it pays to probe the heart deeply, that the truth of God may gain a firm lodgment. In Christ the frost cannot shatter, the earthquake cannot bring to the ground with ruinous crash, and the lightning cannot blast and burn. On this good foundation is God's building—a building to be remembered—not a mass of rude materials heaped together promiscuously. Each piece is properly prepared for its place as in the old Temple. Divine grace must fit man to rest on the foundation, and fit in with the head corner stone. What the Architect and Master builder desires is the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, the hungerers and thirsters after righteousness.

While Paul with all his illustrious ancestry, native ability, and broad culture, was full of the Spirit of persecution, it would have only been an injury to the cause of Christ to have given him a place among the disciples, but after light from heaven shined into his soul so that he prayed and obtain-

ed a spirit of sweet resignation to Jesus, voicing itself in the words: "Lord what wilt thou have me to do?" then his induction into the company of believers through baptism was to them an acquisition of great strength. If Zacchaeus with all his civic associations and great wealth had become a follower of Jesus while still possessed by the spirit of exaction and greed he would have wrought nothing but mischief to the cause of Christ. When, however, the truth found a lodgment in his heart prompting him to say, and suit his action to the word: "The half of my goods I give to the poor and if I have taken ought from any man by false accusation, I restore unto him four fold," then was Zacchaeus a tower of strength to the infant cause of the Redeemer. It remains true to-day that we need men of position, culture and wealth in the church of Christ, but we cannot afford to have them unless they are dominated by the Spirit of self-denying and loving service for Jesus.

God's rule in building is "the image of his Son." To this divine pattern he designs to bring each one. As of old he said to Moses: "See thou make all things according to the pattern, &c," and in this restriction forbade him exercising his own notions of propriety; so the Holy Spirit said through Paul, to the Corinthian church, "keep the ordinances as I delivered them to you." The order of their deliverance is stated beyond a peradventure in the 18th chapter of the Acts. "Many of the Corinthians hearing, believed, and were baptized." The Supper which this church had so sadly perverted was given afterward, for there was no interval between the belief and baptism in which to insert it. The divine order of faith, baptism, Lord's Supper must be kept in true all-gance to the great head of the Church. Fancy must not usurp the place of faith, as in the case of Cain. Sentimentalism must not be allowed to override the commands of God. Some Christians in relation to ordinances are excessively pliable and think that this maudlin tenderness is a high exhibition of Christian Charity, forgetting, that, that is charity which rejoiceth in the truth, nothing else. If the word of God exhorts us to a keeping of ordinances in a given order then Christian Charity demands that we thus keep them, and other course in error, and at least can only plead the excuse of being done ignorantly in unbelief. The answer of the scriptures to the many questions of to-day in reference to doctrines and ordinances is simply this; Our doctrines must be held in a "holy life," and the ordinances be exemplified in "newness of life," and both in uncompromising allegiance to the word of truth. The application of God's building rules to man ever leads to these results. A renewed and holy life is the best evidence that God has inserted us in his building.

Each piece of material must fill its own place, and is absolutely important. There are diversities of gifts, but none is so poor as not to have one, and that one should serve the purpose the great Master-Builders had in conferring it. If the talents of any are few or humble so much the more easily may they employ them, and God will not hold them guiltless if they do not. All can teach, or be taught—lead, or be led—counsel, or execute—pray, or be present to listen. If any knows not his place of usefulness in the Christian Church, and wants to know it, he should at once go and tell the whole matter to God, and judicious Christian friends and if he is willing he will soon be to work.

God's building groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord. Centuries have given it breadth and beauty. Like the mustard tree it has sent forth branches on every side, and like the leaven in meal it has worked, bringing the mass to the consistency of itself. The normal nature of Christ's kingdom is that of organic increase, an increase both extensive and intensive, manifesting itself in enlargement and purity. The growth is in Christ in whom all the build-firmly framed together groweth. It is then not only expansion but assimilation, likeness to Christ. How many deformities are now associated with the visible church of Christ! Errors in doctrine and ordinances. Mistakes of heart, head and hands. We rejoice, however, that the building groweth unto an holy temple in Christ, that the blemishes are becoming fewer, and that Christ's prayer for his people "that they all may be one," hastens to the time of answering.

Our blessed Lord gave to the Church a perfect system of truth which in the end is destined to work out a perfect life. Thus truth is presided over by the ever present Spirit of God. The progress humanly speaking may be called slow, but with God a thousand years are as a day. Religious progress is sometimes gained by what men call backward steps, but in God's providence the prosperous and the adverse both work together to usher in the perfect day.

Removed as we are nearly 2000 years from the days of our Lord's earthly teaching, and surveying as we do the kingdom of our divine Master in its many-sided and much disorganized state we are sometimes led to involuntary exclamation: How can this be the outgrowth of the kingdom of Christ, and where is its growing likeness to that simple faith and beautifully suggestive ritual observed by Jesus in Jordan, and in the Jerusalem supper-room. Why on one hand what assumes to be Christ's Church has a usurper on the throne, and a ritual glittering with more than the sensual display which Judaism exhibited. On the other hand we see an organization making the supercilious assumption of: "the church," which at best is but a shadow of the former, a mild caricature of it, a

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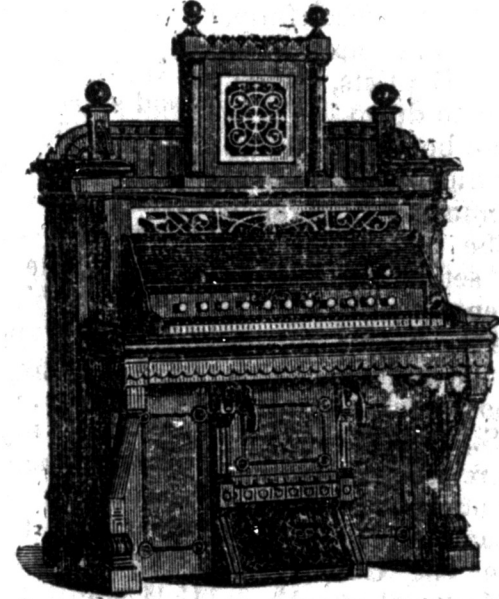
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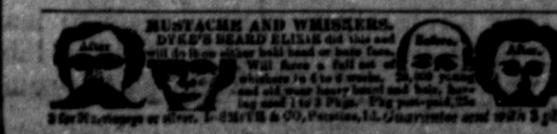
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