

Build on the Rock: 1 Corinthians 3.16-23



Build on the Rock, the Rock that ever stands:
Build on the Rock, and not upon the sands.
You need not fear the storm, or the earthquake SHOCK!
You're safe for ever more if you build on the Rock.

For no one can lay any other foundation than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Pandang was a tall, gentle Nigerian church leader who came to study for a PhD with me in Sheffield. He was passionate about 1 Corinthians, and felt that Paul's letter has a really important message for the church today. For him, the message of the letter can be summed up in one word: fellowship, *koinonia*. (1.9): *God is faithful: by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ.* Being a church — or being a Christian — is all about belonging to the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Pandang told me a story about the church in Nigeria. The government was trying to be even-handed to both Muslims and Christians, and offered a sum of money to both communities to help them build a focal centre in Joss. The Muslims got together and built a huge, splendid mosque right away. But the Christians, he said,

ten years later hadn't even dug the foundations. They couldn't agree what kind of church their great national cathedral would be: Catholic or Protestant? Sudan United Mission or Church of Christ? Your church or my church? And if you can't get the foundation right, the whole building project is undermined — and so a great opportunity for public witness was lost. (That was 30 years ago — I don't know if they ever got their act together to build that cathedral.)

All through these first few chapters, Paul is trying to lay a foundation for the urgent work of building up the church in Corinth. They have a lot of issues (as we shall see) — issues that we still struggle with today. But before you can even begin to discuss them, you have to get the foundations straight. Whose church is it? Yours or mine? His or hers? — or theirs?

Wrong question! says Paul. It doesn't actually matter if your favourite leader is Paul the converted rabbi or Peter the Galilean fisherman or Apollos the sophisticated preacher. They're all under-gardeners in God's garden, and they all have their different roles to play — but the garden is God's, and only God can make the plants grow. *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth* (v.7).

When we had our kitchen done, a load of different trades came in to work on the building-site — brickies, plumbers, electricians, plasterers, tilers, painters ... They seemed to spend their time in (mostly good-natured) banter about each other's work. But the fundamental job (pun intended!) was laying the foundations. Nothing could proceed until that was done — and the building inspector had to come to check that it was done right. (Actually the extension has much better foundations than the rest of our 1930s house!) Some parts of the work have proved more enduring than others — the decor will change over time. But the building itself rests on a solid foundation — that's the bit that will last.

That's how it is with the church, says Paul. The church is God's Temple, built for God's glory as a dwelling for God's Holy Spirit (v.16): *Do you not know that you are God's Temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you?* Paul of course wasn't talking about a marble building, like the splendid temples of Corinth — he was talking about the church itself, the ordinary, everyday people meeting in a back-street workshop — and called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ, God's Son. That's where God's Spirit makes his (or her) dwelling-place: that's where God's holiness is earthed. And no human leader can make that happen. God's church can only be built on one foundation: *For no one can lay any other foundation than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ* (v.11). Get the feet right, and the rest will follow, says Aslan, breathing on the feet of the stone statues in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

It isn't only churches (and kitchens) that need a good foundation: we all do. *If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?* asks the psalmist. When things start to slip and slide, we need to feel the solid rock under our feet, like the great rock that dominates the site of Corinth. Time and again, the psalmists come back to the Rock at the heart of the City of God, the Rock at the heart of our faith:

*On God alone my heart in stillness waits: from him comes my salvation.
He alone is my rock and my salvation: my stronghold, so that I shall never be shaken.* (Ps 62.1-2)

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,
Though the mountains tremble in the heart of the seas;
Though the waters rage and swell, and though the mountains quake at the towering seas.
The Lord of hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our refuge.* (Ps 46.1-3, 7)

God bless,
Loveday

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