

Building and Contending

In describing the preparatory considerations needed for those who desire to follow him, the Lord Jesus Christ spoke of the principles of true discipleship:

“Whosoever doth not bear his cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to build it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace. So likewise, whosoever he be of any of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27-33).

The comparison is that of building and contending. A man intending to build a tower must first consider the resources at his disposal, ensuring that he has the means to see the thing through to the desired end. Likewise, a king about to engage in war needs to ensure he has enough men to reasonably contend with his enemy – else midway through the conflict, he may find it needful to seek peace in order to survive. And these circumstances, according to our Lord, compare with those of the disciple seeking to serve him. Such a one needs to build – and also to contend.

BUILDING

That which the obedient believer commits himself to building, is “the house of God, which is the ecclesia of the living God, the pillar and ground of the Truth” (1Tim 3:15). The ecclesia then, is “a spiritual house”, made up of “lively stones” (1Pet 2:5), “builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit” (Eph 2:22). And as such, it ought to be the Pillar and Ground of Truth – The Truth as revealed by God himself. This is that task that lies before every constituent member of the House therefore – to construct an ecclesial edifice of Truth; “building up themselves in their most holy faith” (Jude 20), that the Whole be an embodiment of the Spirit of Truth; a suitable residing place of the Most High, following a transformation to Immortality.

In his parable, the Lord speaks of the need to consider the resources needed to build a tower. Interestingly, the Scriptures describe the frustrated attempt for another tower to be built – but not to the glory of God. Genesis chapter 11 describes the first human construction project:

“... and they said, Go to, let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded” (Gen. 11:4-5).

This tower was to the glory and aggrandisement of man: “let us make **us** a name”. Its design was to preserve a unity amongst the builders, lest they “be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth”. But Yahweh confounded the languages in a way which was totally unexpected: and as a consequence, they could not finish the tower that they had started to build.

By contrast, there is another Tower, to the glory of God, and not man. “The Name of Yahweh is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe” (Prov. 18:10). Again, the purpose

of this Tower is for safety and unity, with the righteous running together into it for refuge: and it is “the Name of Yahweh”. And by contrast to Babel – the city of confusion – the righteous seek another city: “a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10).

It is written that: “Except Yahweh build the house, they labour in vain that build it: Except Yahweh keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain” (Psa. 127:1). Those who are involved with building up the ecclesial edifice are described as “labourers together with God” (1 Cor. 3:9), and “workers together with him” (2 Cor. 6:1) - and the Apostle continues: “ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building”. The faithful are not left entirely to their own devices in building up their family name: the building is God’s and He is the prime mover in relation to these things. The work can only succeed with His Blessing and Approval and will be accomplished not for the glory of men, but His Own Glory, and that of His Son. The days are coming when “the towers” of men’s devising will “fall” (Isa. 30:25, cp. 2:14-15). Then, “the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and Yahweh alone shall be exalted in that day” (Isa. 2:17).

The believers in Christ then, must engage in building together in separation from the ways of common Christendom, who seek to be united despite doctrinal differences. In the days of Ezra, there was an equivalent to the modern Ecumenical movement. So we read thus:

“then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do ...” (Ezra 4:2).

Isn’t this just like our day, when men seek to join together in building, saying that “we all worship the same God”, and should build together! But notice the response of the elders: “ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God: but we ourselves together will build unto Yahweh God of Israel ...” (Ezra 4:3). Even so, Paul writes: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? ... what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? ... Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you ...” (2 Cor. 6:14-18). This must be our response: “ye have nothing to do with us”, and “we ourselves together will build” – and with God’s blessing the work will be accomplished “forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

CONTENDING

But vitally important though the work of edification is, that alone is not enough. The Apostle warned that “the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the Truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Tim 4:4). These teachers, elected by those who “love to have it so” are wolves seeking to command the admiration and respect of the flock, promising “liberty” (2 Pet 2:19) from the rigidity and straitness of the Way of Life. Yet, they are themselves but “the servants of corruption”, and being therefore blind leaders, their followers shall be led away from the narrow way (and along the broad way of man’s devising), into the pit from which there is no deliverance. Having turned their ears away from hearing the Truth, they will lose the Hope the Truth gives and shall perish in their own corruption – as it is written: “the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain in the congregation of the dead” (Prov. 21:16).

This being the case, for the faithful servant of Christ, the work of building is not enough. There is also a need to contend against those who seek to hinder the building, who seek to transform the “Pillar” of Truth into a stronghold of Falsehood. As in the days of Nehemiah, those who labour in the Lord’s work, whilst building, must be ready for battle: “every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded” (Neh 4:18). Like these builders of old, we must build, yet being girded with “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” (Eph 6:17) – and be ready to use it at an instant, to “cast down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God” (2Cor 10). So the Spirit exhorts the believer, to be a “good soldier of Jesus Christ” remaining unentangled by the affairs of this life, to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

This is a characteristic of true believers who have a love of the Truth: they “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel: and in nothing terrified by your adversaries” (Phil. 1:28). Of Israel of old, it is written that “they are not valiant for the truth upon the earth” (Jer. 9:3), and so it is also said that “my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: Because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee …” (Hos. 4:6). By contrast, the believers in Christ have “the full assurance of understanding” (Col. 2:2), being those who “believe and know the Truth” (1 Tim. 4:3). They will not be rejected, but will be led into glory by Jesus himself, as the Princely Leader, or “captain” of their “salvation” (Heb. 2:10).

AN INTERNAL WARFARE

But for those who earnestly contend for the faith, the warfare is not external only: it is also internal. The Apostle Paul identified our bodies of sinful flesh as being something to contend against: “I keep under my body and bring it into subjection lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (1 Cor. 9:27). So, he describes our warfare, as “casting down imaginations, and every high things that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Again, he describes “... the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would” (Gal. 5:17 – see also Rom. 7, whole chapter). This is the most difficult aspect of our contending – against our own minds and thoughts: “let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto Yahweh, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7).

Finally in this regard, we should take note that our contending should be motivated by a love of the truth, and not only out of a hatred for the error. The ecclesia at Ephesus were good at exposing false teachers, yet were rebuked for losing the love that they had at the first:

“I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars; and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou hast fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy lampstand out of his place, except thou repent” (Rev. 2:2-5).

This ecclesia were contending together in identifying and expelling false teachers – yet they placed themselves into the position of potentially being snuffed out, because they had forsaken their first love and works.

So then, it is needful to both build and contend. There are those who seek to alter our course, telling us that we must build only. The Truth will never be lost they say, so we must occupy our time with edifying one another, rather than to oppose one another. So much is true – but the reason why the Truth is never lost, is because it has so pleased the Father to preserve the Way of Life through the labours of his Cherubic Servants, who wield the sword of the Spirit against the thorns of apostasy. And they do so in the knowledge that the cause is a just one, sanctioned and required by their Lord. Conversely a minority appear to delight in controversy, and would have us become wholly devoted to contention, engaging in no other work, but to resist the Apostates. But such surely need reminding that the primary duty is to build; and as in Nehemiah's day, the purpose of our earnest contention, is to prevent that work from being hindered. No good can come from those who merely oppose; the house needs to be strengthened and built up in the Holy Faith also. Both activities are needful – and though one is most frowned upon by those imbibed with the spirit of liberality and toleration which prevails in our day, the rewards of the labours exerted will make it all worthwhile. In our day, those who "contend for the faith" are branded "unloving", whereas the woolly thinkers who serve up dainty delights of smooth words, "desiring conditions of peace" with the enemy, are held in honour. But such does nothing to edify the body in the doctrines of Truth, as will be revealed at the last.

The question for those who have taken upon themselves the cross of Christ is: have you considered your own circumstance, to ensure that you have what it takes to see the building through? And to win the warfare? What does it take? Faith. Faith is that which ensures the victory (1Jno 5:4), and is the motivating force of our building (Jude 20). Gideon had few men against many, yet through Faith he overcame. Nehemiah worked with labourers who were weak by comparison to their adversaries, yet through Faith, the walls were built, and the city made secure. Faith is that which gives God pleasure (Heb 11:6), and when God is well pleased, He will give the desire of His servants.

This then, is the course that we adopt - to build up those who need strengthening, and to contend earnestly for the faith. And as we attend to this task, we are determined not be distracted by those who dispute our work with human reasonings to no profit (cp Neh 6:3). Rather, we endeavour to rightly divide the Word of Truth, seeking to be faithful workmen who need not be ashamed before our God (1Tim 2:15).

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